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Exile Vol. XLV No. 2

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Exile Vol. XLV No. 2

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Exile



Spring 1999

Exile

You of
Broken
You who can know at first hand,
Hated, what is, mislabeled
I have beaten out my exile.

**Denison University's
Literary and Art Magazine**

**43rd Year
Spring Issue**

—Eric Frensd

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—Ezra Pound

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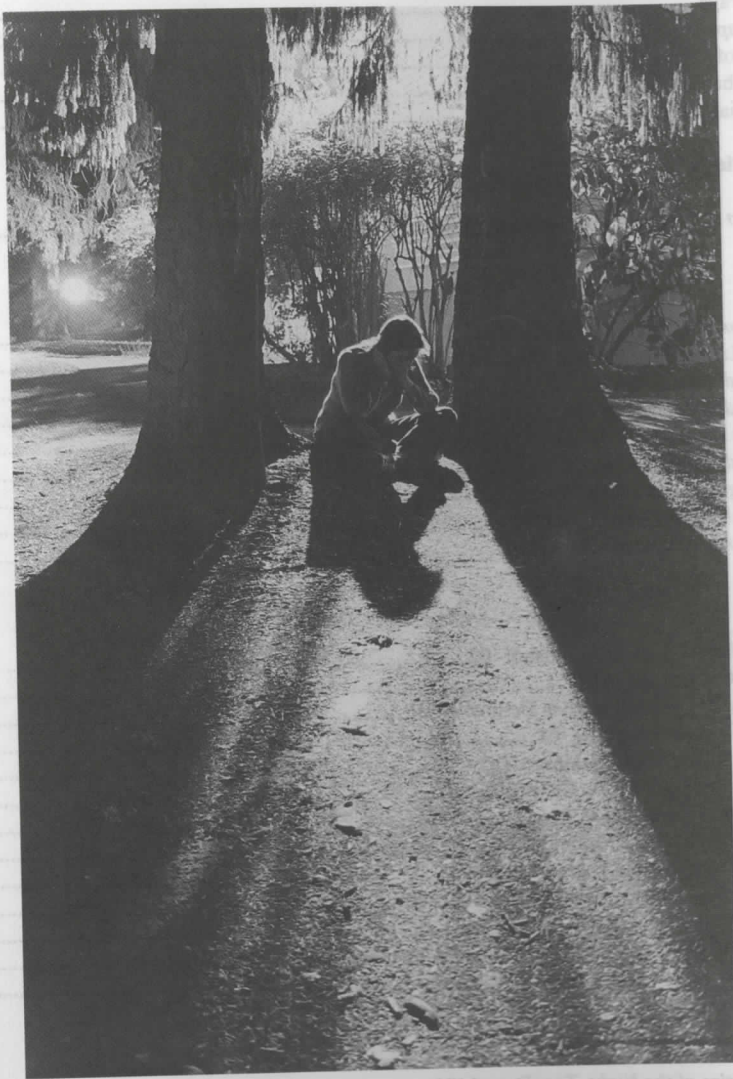
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"Self-Portrait" by Angela Bliss '99

Bolted Back

At the age of four, I stood between a chain
linked fence and an aluminum shed
as a neighborhood boy forced my pants down
to peek between my legs. I did not know
how to stop him with words and my tiny fists
did not stand a chance against his body, muscled

from a summer of swimming and baseball. I listened
to my father's lawn mower chopping
the smell of cut grass in the far front yard. I held
my breath hoping he would turn
the corner of the house. When the lawn mower sputtered
to a stop, I crawled inside myself and burrowed

a hole from throat to spleen. Sliding
down the slope of my spine, I made of myself a screw
to hold my lower back in place.

At the dinner table that evening, with empty
throat and churning stomach, I struggled
to dislodge myself from backbone.

I am a woman now. My mother compliments my posture
at my every homecoming and men have rubbed
the curve at the small of my back.

But all are unaware of the bolt holding me upright,
pushing words of violation up my vertebrae,
through my throat, and past my lips.

—Michelle Grindstaff '02

Squall

Moist fingertips
 inch over and around the mounds of pines
 that separate Eggemoggin Reach
 from Walker Pond.
 And a far-off air horn sounds
 one
 two
 three
 short blasts.
 A striking purple *strato nimbus*
 against a bright noonday sky
 tumbles
 just above the delicate ripples—
 tickling their tops
 into white-capped submission.
 And we flee,
 transforming the boathouse
 into our bomb shelter
 that preserves
 (for a moment)
 the sound of shuddering leaves on the roof
 and the scent of warm, dry wood
 until bedlam pervades
 the tentative clangs and dings of halyards.

—Georgia Riepe '02

Loaves and Fishes

Great Grandma worked at the first fish plant
 in Penobscot Bay—started at sixteen.
 She never liked the smell of them cooking
 after that
 hacked from the bone by a machine,
 two halves pink and vulnerable.
 Schools of haddock, mackerel, and herring
 become just plain fish,
 faceless profits fleshed out like the body broken.

Turning fish into sticks, and steaks,
 less into more.
 The weight of scales like values lost.
 Thin white veins of parasites
 pumping through them like arteries
 down the conveyor belt.
 Plucking out these worms like birds
 over-wintering, knocking their heads
 against solid ground over and over,
 hovering above their work,
 separating their minds from their bodies
 and throwing them back to the ocean
 for the gulls.
 One eye to the sky for the first time.

—Maeghan Demmons '01



"For a Living" by Angela Bliss '99

In the Aisles of the Night

*The Human Face, a Furnace seal'd,
The Human Heart, its hungry Gorge.*

—William Blake

Josh and I are down on Aisle Four complaining about how much we don't want to work tonight even though we're just starting and how Lorraine kept bitching at us last night for not keeping every single product fronted perfectly on the shelves before we closed.

"Someday I'll marry her."

I stop chewing on my thumbnail. "Lorraine? What's wrong with you? She's butt."

He explains he didn't mean our blue-eyeshadowed supervisor, but rather the Preference by L'Oreal color 89B chick.

If you absolutely have to stock health and beauty aids, the hair dyes are definitely the ones to choose. Deodorants don't stack well and usually end up falling all over each other and vitamins take forever because the bottles and packages are so small and you of course never want to have to touch anything to do with feminine hygiene, so by default hair dyes are fairly okay. Plus Josh says the wall of hair dye boxes is like that page in the *Enquirer* with the head shots of all the Miss America contestants, so apparently that's a bonus also.

Josh holds his box in the palm of one hand and covers a yawn with the other. "I think it's her eyes. I have to marry somebody with big eyes." He's blushing now.

I pick up a box and scan the shelves. "Have you seen where Nice 'n' Easy 67F goes? Brown, shoulder-length hair, blue eyes...I wouldn't mind marrying her, if I weren't waiting for Mary Kate Olsen."

"Is she a senior?"

"Mary Kate Olsen—you know, *Full House*, *Two of a Kind*. She's the more sporty one. Ashley's almost too girly."

Josh reaches over me to shelve a Clairol Casting Tone-on-Tone and scowls. "You're weird, man."

I drop my lower jaw in disbelief. "I said I'm waiting for her. She should mature pretty soon. Plus, she's twelve, so we're not that far apart or anything. So do you know where Nice 'n' Easy 67F goes?"

He grabs the box from my hand and places it on the shelf directly in front of where I'm standing. "You're a dumbass."

"So, at least I'm not basing my future wife on the size of her eyes. And just so you know, I've got the reins on the Olsen twins bandwagon, and I suggest you grab a seat on this hayride before it overflows and people and hay and hot cider spill out all over the dirt path."

Josh fingers his earring. "What are you talking about?"

"All I'm saying is that in five years or so, Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen will be every teenage boy's dream chicks."

Josh advises me to shut up and just do some work for once before he whups my ass, fool, and I'm amused by the prospect of violence from this toughguy who blushes when he talks about some girl's eyes. I've never had to stock tampons or condoms with him but Beth says it's so like the cutest thing ever or whatever because he's so like completely quiet and so bright red—oh my god I'm totally not kidding—the whole entire time. She also says he's such a nice guy, such a sweetie.

"Beth thinks you're such a nice guy, such a sweetie," I tell him in my best Beth voice and I'm assuming he'll respond with "Shut up, dickhead," like he always does when I make fun of him, but instead he straightens his cheap tie that's probably one of his dad's, just like his creased white shirt that's more polyester than cotton. It's stiff and uncomfortable-looking, like wool except a lot cheaper.

I ask him what his deal is and then I hear "Can you help me, young men?" so I turn around to face an old woman clutching a walker and I imitate his smile. She wants to know where we young fellas are hiding the rolled oats and Josh says Aisle Ten and I say near the cereals, and with quivering lips she thanks us and then hobbles off.

Josh sighs and runs his fingers through his white-blond hair as he tries to find the place for a box of Grecian Formula. "Being old must suck."

I nod my assent and think about the unabashed naiveté of his blushing cheeks and suddenly hope Mary Kate doesn't hit puberty quite yet. But then I hear "Stocker to cart check" interrupting a Muzak version of Amy Grant's "Baby, Baby" and I realize I have more entertaining things to care about than youth and innocence and old age and William Blake. Namely, Josh doing a cart check.

If you can't take at least seven carts at a time you're basically worthless. I usually go for nine. Josh gets four. Once he and I were checking carts together and he was pulling some out of the Cart Corral and I drove some in to herd him in there but I pushed too hard and he fell and the black tennis shoes on his feet flailing in the air looked like hooves. His generic fleece pullover and even part of his white shirt underneath were smudged with dirt or oil or something and he called me a dickhead and I looked at him sprawled on the asphalt and I laughed at him and called him my bitch and told him I made him, I just made him.

While Josh is busy gathering carts Lorraine summons me up front to set up a display near the checkout lanes underneath the big banner that says "Check Out Our Savings." She's working the register on Lane One because Lois is on Two and Beth's on Three and Lois' arthritic hands move slowly and she's too friendly to the customers so the lines are extra long. Devon's on Aisle Four with his light off but there's someone there anyway and he's frowning. Beth always complains about being cold because the automatic doors constantly open and Devon always complains about everything but Lorraine and Lois have been here forever and know from experience to plan ahead for the temperature, and they don't seem to notice what bothers Devon. He's been here a long time too but he's younger so it's different somehow.

Lorraine always wears this one striped cardigan over her smock. It's pale orange with black stripes but next to the faded blue of the smock she's worn for years it burns bright like the fluorescent lights that hang from the acoustical tiles.

"Hello, ma'am, how are you?" she smiles as she greets her next customer. After she receives a generic "Fine, thanks" reply she wants to know if ma'am found everything

all right and her eyes remain in contact and her smile continues to stretch even as she scans each item. She's the human abstract, a divine image of the professional cashier. Her striped arms like long bar codes move almost in symmetry as cans and boxes pass from one hand to the other across the scanner, and while I'm removing the plastic wrap from my display I see her as an intrinsic extension of the register and the conveyor belt. But then I notice her peacock eye makeup again and I remember that she dared to make me re-front all the shelves on Aisles Eight and Nine last night just because they weren't perfect.

Two of the three junior high badasses in Lois' aisle keep hitting each other with their giant Pixie Stix while the she rings up their friend. When they knock a group of mini-flashlight key chains off the impulse-buy rack she tells them to settle down, please, and they eye each other and attempt to conceal their laughter by coughing.

"It's a good thing you boys are buying all that Robitussin," she says, and they laugh even more. I look up at them and chuckle too.

Beth has two baby doll barrettes nestled among the highlights in her hair. She smells like peaches or apricots and her left bra strap is falling off her shoulder. There are three middle-aged men in her line and only one woman and as the first man leans against the conveyor belt with his hands in his pockets she smiles without opening her mouth and her eyes barely even squint. It's simple horizontal lip movement but it's enough to earn her a wink and a leer at her chest, which he covers by pretending to look at her name tag.

I think the coolest thing about working the register has to be the light above the aisle, because you can turn it off and not be bothered. Apparently the woman in the airbrushed Minnie Mouse tee in Devon's lane is either an idiot or some type of social deviant unaware of conventional grocery store etiquette because she's completely ignoring his extinguished light.

Devon tells her he's closed and she grunts. "You're standing in front of a register, aren't you?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I was just about to count the money in my drawer." When she still doesn't move, he suggests she try another aisle.

"They're all crowded," she snorts. "Lane Four, here, isn't."

He starts gnawing on his lower lip. "That's because I'm closed."

"Kid," she looks at his name tag. "Devon, you're wearing a shirt and tie and standing at a register. To me, that says you're a working cashier."

"Listen, I am a working cashier, but . . ."

She points a finger at him like she's his mother and he scowls. "And as a working cashier, you're supposed to work."

"And to cashier, right?" he turns to his register. "Actually, ma'am, I'm supposed to run a money check because my shift is finished." That pisses her off.

"Is your manager around? Bring him over here." Her nostrils are even flaring. But he sighs and gives in probably because he fears authority or he doesn't care enough to care about her anymore, something like that.

I look back at Lane Three because I hear Beth's admirer/harasser/whatever clearing his throat. "How's life treating you tonight, Beth?" He's buying All Bran and Frosted Flakes, so either he's torn between conflicting feelings of maturity and youth or he's got kids. He's wearing a plaid button-down, maybe Nautica but probably just Hunt

Club or something, and navy Dockers, so I decide he drives a Taurus and has a wall of stereo equipment under track lighting in his great room. He probably even calls it a great room.

Beth only looks at the cereal she's scanning. "Oh, I'm all right."

I hear the Disney woman in Lane Four say, "That's why I didn't want to wait in line in another aisle," so I check her out again and see she's only buying one can of cat food.

I think her purchase is bizarre until I remember that Devon's dealing with an idiot or social deviant who has no regard for the light above the register. As I insert tab D into hole D and complete the construction of my cardboard display stand I decide I'm much more important than her, and certainly much cooler, but for a second I regret thinking that.

But then she frowns and rifles through her purse and eventually asks Devon if he takes Visa and I turn my head so she doesn't see me laughing, knocking three boxes of macaroni off the stand in the process. Lorraine begs ma'am's pardon for a second and smoothes a wrinkle in her striped cardigan—I swear she's preening herself every time she gets mad—while she tells me I just have to be more careful sometimes.

I mumble something about how her mama wasn't careful and she was born, but I stop amusing myself with stupid comeback lines when I notice Devon not attempting to conceal his disdain for the Disney woman.

"You're using a credit card to buy a can of cat food?" he sneers, and I decide my original thoughts about her worth as a person were indeed warranted. I exchange a glance with him and she sees it and glares at both of us.

When the guy in the Dockers pays Beth he clears his throat again and tells her to keep the change. "Don't work too hard," he grins as he folds his wallet into his back pocket.

She raises an eyebrow and employs her closed-mouth smile again. "I try not to."

Lois concentrates on smoothing the creases out of the boys' wadded dollars and places them carefully in her register. When they leave she returns all the fallen key chains to their hangers and wipes down her conveyor belt, and I can see her teeth as she smiles.

Lorraine's smiling while she loads a group of plastic bags into her customer's cart. "You have a nice night, ma'am, and come back soon."

Devon forces out a "Have a nice night" without a smile and the Disney woman glares again, but this time only at him. "I know you don't mean that."

Of course he doesn't. No one ever means it. It's like "God bless you" after a sneeze. But he pastes on an ingratiating smile this time and says it again, and even throws in a "Come back soon," but she doesn't hear him end the phrase with "stupid bitch."

I do though so I tell him that woman was a freak and he agrees and complains about having to re-count his drawer.

I return to placing macaroni boxes on the display until he slams his fist against the side of his register. "God, people are retarded. They just need to, I don't know, not be so stupid or something."

My forehead wrinkles and I bite my lower lip. "Exactly. Well put. Not be so stupid or something."

"Bite me. I should be a stocker all the time." He grabs a stack of five-dollar bills and flips through them, arranging them all in the same direction. "You guys don't have to deal with dipshit people or handle their dirty, wadded-up money and put it all in order because that's the way bitchmaster Lorraine likes it."

I rub my eyes and yawn. "Like it's so hard. We always have to put things in order too. It's called stocking."

"Well yeah, but that's what you do. You put things on a shelf."

"You move things across a scanner."

He returns the money to his drawer and scratches the back of his neck. "You know what? I don't care. Any type of work at this place is retarded but I don't care because I'm done. Are you here till close?"

"Yep."

"That sucks. I'm outta here, man. This place is for dipshits and retards." He removes his money tray from the drawer and heads to the front office.

I pick up another box of macaroni and elect to agree only partially with his final statement, thinking of the Disney woman and the junior-high badasses and the Dockers man and deciding that the customers are indeed dipshits.

"See ya later, loser," I give him a nod but he's already pushing the automatic door to make it open even faster. Through the big windows I see him punch Josh on the shoulder while he's straining against four carts and then he rips his tie off and throws it somewhere in his car. He guns it out of his parking space and knocks over a cart and probably doesn't even check his rear-view mirror.

Lorraine tells me to come over here once I finish up with the display so I do once I'm done and she hands me a package of chocolate-chip cookies and tells me to take it back to its proper place over on Aisle Nine. Grocery stores would be so much easier to work in if they didn't have customers wandering around messing things up all the time because people don't realize that when they pick up a box of Chips Ahoy and then decide they're too fat or too poor or don't want it for whatever reason and just toss it aside to the impulse-buy rack in the checkout lane, Josh or I have to return it to its proper place over on Aisle Nine.

I groan and slouch and raise my eyebrows. "Can't you have Josh do it?"

"He's still checking carts."

"Oh yeah. Of course he is. Four at a time. But he could do it when he finishes, right? I mean, I doubt we'll sell out of cookies anytime soon anyway, so it doesn't really matter when it gets done." I like to get under her skin every once in a while, to watch the sinews in her neck twist and tense up.

She blinks but keeps her eyes closed long enough for me to have to look at all that light blueness burning on her eyelids and she folds her striped arms. "Just do it before I get irritated." But I guess I dared to push it further than she thought I could so I don't say anything else and just go do it.

The Chips Ahoy are in the middle between the generic assorted-flavor sugar wafers that Josh likes and the Pepperidge Farms mature woman cookies that Lorraine likes. I like the Chips Ahoy.

"Can't you do something about that?" some old man I didn't even notice before demands while I return the cookies to their place on the shelf. He points up to the fluores-

cent lights above us alternating between short periods of sterile yellow glow and gray haze.

"Oh, sure, I'll talk to my manager, sir."

His bald head sticks out from the collar of his charcoal jacket all pasty and pink like a sick rose on a tombstone. Plus he's wearing Sansabelt pants so I remember Josh saying how it must suck to be old.

He scratches a shaggy eyebrow. "Well, just talking won't help. I want you to fix the lights."

I want him to fix his attitude but I don't tell him that and instead just assure him that I'll get it done, sir.

That buzzing sound you forget about because it's normally all you hear keeps blinking intermittently as the lights continue to flicker. It only gets annoying when it's not constant and I think about the contrast between the harsh yellow and the soft gray and how they're flashing and buzzing and fighting against each other, and I know there has to be a better way to mix the two than this violent collision. But this man wants new fluorescent tubes and who am I to argue, so I head over to Lorraine to tell her the lights need replaced on Aisle Nine and I know she'll agree because she likes them burning as bright as possible.

So when Josh finally gets finished checking carts he and I have to go fix the deviant lights. I push open the metal doors near the frozen food section and Josh follows me into the back room. It's dark here compared to the rest of the store because there aren't fluorescent lights but instead just regular incandescent bulbs hanging from the ceiling and the walls are just plain gray cinder blocks. Josh tells me he likes it better back here because it's too bright out front.

I step on a bottle of shampoo that fell from somewhere and I roll my ankle. "Dammit, I can't even see what's in front of me. Yeah it's too bright out there, but I wouldn't mind some more lights back here."

"Well, I like it how it is."

"That's because you're stupid."

Josh scowls. "Yeah, well, I'd rather be stupid than..."

"Than what? Bring it on, I can take it."

"Than...I don't know...you."

"Wow, good one."

"Shut up, dickhead."

The fluorescent tubes are down in the storage area in the basement and to get there you have to go down this narrow spiral staircase. The brick walls around it have probably never been cleaned and it's even too dark for Josh to like it. I tell him to go down there because I don't want to and he whines but eventually gives in because he knows he can't beat me.

He squints and pouts and grunts. "You always make me do this stuff."

Which is true, but I certainly don't see it as my problem that he lets me. Whenever we have to front the shelves at the end of the night, Josh starts on Aisle One and I start on Aisle Twelve because the health and beauty supplies are on the first aisles and I always make him do them because they're a pain in my ass and I'm too lazy to care about them. He always complains but not enough and I ignore him and soon he gives up and

calls me a dickhead and then sulks over to Aisle One and I laugh at him.

He looks at the ground and plays with his tie. "I hate the basement. It's always hot from the furnace and you never know what's down there."

I just laugh and say something about how he's a such good stocker boy and if he does his duty, he shouldn't need to fear harm.

He looks up at me. "Well, it's your turn next time Lorraine wants something out of there."

"No it's not."

Josh takes a deep breath like it's his last taste of fresh air before descending a chimney or something and then he starts down the staircase. He's waving his hands, clutching at the spider webs around him and I hear him say something about how much he hates this.

When he comes back up with four long tubes his white shirt and white-blonde hair aren't anymore, but instead are a sort of dingy gray in places and I think about the time I knocked him down in the Cart Corral. He's got stripes of spider webs across his back and he sneezes from the dust and glares at me.

"I really don't like you anymore."

And I completely believe him without quite knowing why, but vaguely noticing that he's actually making eye contact with me and not blushing.

I grab a ladder and this time he pushes open the metal doors near the frozen food section and we make our way over to Aisle Nine.

"You want me to climb up and do it?" I'm trying to make peace now because I've never seen him get angry and it weards me out.

But he looks right at me again. "No, I'll do it. I don't care." He hasn't even bothered to brush the dust off yet.

I decide to let him do whatever because I don't care to argue with him and I enjoy as little work as possible anyway so he climbs the ladder and I just hold it steady.

The lights are behind frosted plastic panels that fit among the rows of acoustical tiles. They're hinged on one side and supposed to swing open for easy access to the fluorescent tubes underneath, but they never work that simply because the hinges get stuck or something and you usually have to pull on a panel until you're about to rip an entire row of tiles down, exposing all the ductwork inside, and then it finally opens.

That's exactly what Josh is doing except he can't get it open and his face is getting all blotchy and red and he's starting to sweat. I ask him if he needs any help and he refuses.

"Fine, I didn't want to help you anyway."

"Would you just shut up and let me do this?" He's breathing heavily now and I can hear that whistling sound as he inhales and exhales through his nose.

The canned grocery store soundtrack starts playing a Muzak "Eye of the Tiger." I smile to myself as I think about Josh and I having a big all-out brawl to see who can install the lights better (me, of course), but then I remember that neither of us really wants to be doing this anyway because we both hate how bright these stupid lights are. So I decide against pushing the ladder and watching him crash to the floor in a broken heap of fluorescent tubes and cheap poly-blend fabrics.

But I shake the ladder a little just to get a reaction out of him. "How's it going

up there, buddy?"

"Would you stop shaking me? You're not my buddy. And you're not helping."

"Oh, so now you want my help?"

"What? No. Just shut up and hold the ladder."

I suddenly decide it's time to become philosophical and poetic or something. "You know, I read somewhere that if you tell your friend that you're angry, you won't be anymore."

"Won't be friends?"

"No, dicko. You won't be angry."

He looks at me and hesitates for a second. "So now you're saying we're friends?"

"Co-workers, associates, whatever. The basic theme still applies."

"Oh."

"But if you don't say you're angry, it'll grow, like a tree or something."

Josh ignores my rambling and continues trying to tear the panel open and I'm still busy holding the ladder and wondering about how we can return to a co-worker relationship in which I'm more in charge until Beth walks up. Actually she's kind of skipping.

"Oh my God—Josh, your face is so bright red." I'm thinking this definitely isn't what he needs.

He looks down at her and sneers. "That's because this is hard to do."

"Well, then," she puts her arm around me, "why don't you have this piece try for awhile?" He needs that even less.

"I'll do it, okay? I can do it."

She pushes back a cuticle with her thumb. "You're so cute." If his face weren't already flushed from exertion and anger he would've been blushing as soon as she flounced over here. "Oh, Lorraine wanted me to tell you guys to finish stocking the hair dyes when you're done with this little project."

Josh groans. "All she wants us to do is work."

And I of course just can't repress the witty sarcasm. "Funny, since we're, you know, at work and all."

Beth and I enjoy a hearty chuckle but Josh ignores us and attacks the light panel with renewed vigor. He's gnashing his teeth and snorting and clawing at it with rabid zeal and frankly I'm a little disturbed.

"Dude, you're a beast."

And then with a grunt he pulls really hard and the ladder vibrates in my hands. The entire light panel breaks free and the three of us are pelted in a shower of broken acoustical tiles and screws and dust and miscellaneous debris. There's a big hole in the ceiling and the light panel sways over Josh's head, suspended only by the electrical wires. It's still semi-working though and the dying bulbs' yellow and gray flashes of light make the scene even more beyond bizarre.

"Whoa," is all Josh can articulate, and Beth and I echo his sentiments as we brush ourselves off.

Lorraine comes sprinting over with the back of her striped cardigan flapping behind her, demanding to know what in God's name happened. We're just kind of staring blankly at the carnage Josh produced while random customers start flocking around us,

asking stupid questions with their hands covering their open mouths.

"What's wrong with you? What did you do?" Lorraine's livid and she closes her eyes for a few seconds to regroup or something. Her blue makeup looks even more offensive under this furious light.

Josh's lips are quivering and he takes a step down the ladder. "I don't know. I just, I..."

But he's interrupted by a loud creaking and the wires snap and the panel swings down and smacks into him and the ladder falls over. The severed wires cause a short or whatever happens when the current breaks and all the sets of lights dim and then die throughout the store. The emergency lights blink on immediately but they're not nearly as bright as the main fluorescent ones.

He really does crash to the floor in a broken heap of fluorescent tubes and cheap poly-blend fabrics, but not because I did anything. He lands kind of on his side and he's laying on the floor holding his left arm and grimacing. His face has lost all its glaring redness but now it's just weak and sallow instead.

Beth bends over to help him to his feet. "Oh my God, are you okay?"

He repels her with eyes that flash like the fluorescent lights he just killed. "Leave me alone—I'm fine." But I know he's not.

"I can't believe this. I cannot believe this." Lorraine's rubbing her striped arms frantically. "Look at this. Just look—what the hell have you done to my store?"

He turns to her and just stares with the same savage look he gave Beth.

And Lois is yelling from up front at the registers. "What's going on? Lorraine, what should I do? Is everything okay?"

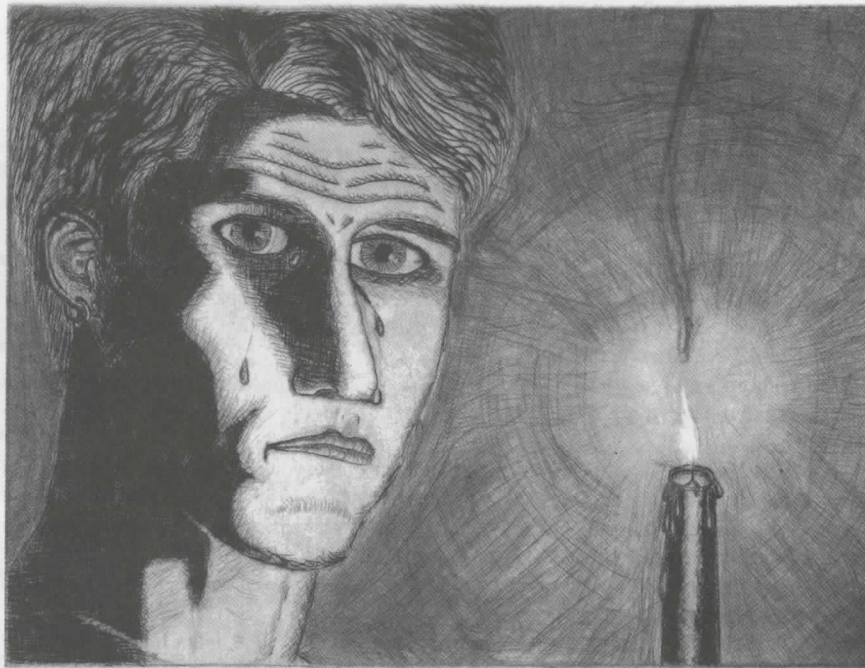
Lorraine spins around and hisses at her. "Everything's under control. Tell the customers that everything's fine. Just keep ringing people up. We need somebody up there."

But no one's up there except Lois because everyone in the store converged on Aisle Nine when they heard the violent racket. Everybody's just kind of standing around uselessly, looking concerned but not very helpful and wondering what could possibly have caused this fearful situation. I stare at the old man with the pasty pink head that made us fix the lights in the first place and I try to look as pissed as possible so he knows this is all his fault.

Then I look down at Josh and he's trying to hold back tears that are probably just as much from embarrassment as they are from pain. When I knocked him down in the Cart Corral he stayed on his back on the asphalt like a submissive dog while I told him I made him. I look at the fallen ladder on the floor next to him and I realize he climbed it because of me.

Then he rises clumsily from the wreckage on the floor. He's still piercing Lorraine's light blueness with his own burning eyes and I think again that I made him, I just made him.

—Tom Dussel '01



"Untitled" by Frazier Taylor '02

The Art of Hearing: Interview with Stanley Plumly

*Stanley Plumly is the author of six books of poetry, including *Out-of-the-Body Travel* and *In the Outer Dark*. His most recent book is *The Marriage in the Trees*. Along with being a distinguished lyric poet, Plumly is a major scholar on the life and poetry of John Keats. Plumly has received grants from the NEA, Guggenheim, and Ingram-Merill foundations. He has lectured and taught throughout the country. Currently he is a professor of English at the University of Maryland, College Park. An Exile editor spoke with him recently.*

EXILE: I've noticed in your earlier work, the poems, as in *The Giraffe*, are much shorter, and there's more of the obvious, always present "I," and in the recent works, the stanzas seems more open, longer, and the "I" is more in the background.

PLUMLY: That's learning. That's getting better, and I hope, wiser and richer, and all that stuff. My first two books, I have to say, and I've said this before, I didn't have workshops. I didn't know anybody. [The poems] were my workshops. That's where I learned and in a way the learning process is about doing what you can do and then getting past that point. That's what I could do. I think those are typical problems of a young poet. It's like when children are asked to draw. They always make themselves big or small, depending, and the rest of the world in proportion or disproportion. The rest of the world is in disproportion to myself in those poems—I'm large and it's small. Well, I figured out that it's quite the other way around, that I'm small and it's large. That's a much healthier and more rewarding theory, it seems to me. That's what you see in the poems from *Out-of-the-Body Travel* on—a recognition of the scale and size of memory and experience in that memory compared to one part of it, and in a way I was just a part of the drama of that memory. The rhetoric fits that perception. The lines get wider. The stanzas get thicker. The poems get longer.

EXILE: What about the landscape of your poems, past and present? James Wright was a big influence on me, I guess, and you and Wright both came from the same landscape, yet your poems are so different.

PLUMLY: We're from the same county. He was from the lower part of the county and I was born in the upper part, which is the farming area in Barnsville. St. Claresville is the county seat and it's between Barnsville and further high up, Martin's Ferry, which is right on the river and the industrial part of that county. But James Wright, as much as I love him, his impact on my own poems has been, I think, not great. I can think of other poets he's influenced much more. We share something else, a sense of the world, a sense of seeing the world, and a sense of place. The actual writing—there are other people who have had an impact on me that he doesn't have, the way he makes a poem, the voice of the poem.

EXILE: Well, continuing the idea of landscape, I just spent five months in England. I lived there for five months and what I was struck with was time, the idea of time in that place versus the idea of time here, in this place. I was talking to an English writer, Neil Gaiman, and he seemed to think that the difference between England and America was that in England, one hundred miles is a big space, and in America, a hundred years is a long time. Is that notion in any way connected with your feelings about the so-called American line, the inability to make an American line in poetry?

PLUMLY: Definitely. Whitman says that, really. He was the first one to make an issue that the size of the poem, that the grasp of the poem, that the embrace of the poem must match the size or sense of experience in our landscape—in Robert Lowell’s phrase, “forever pioneering” sense that we’re always moving in the direction of the future, the open road sense. England—you go over there and the trees seem shorter. Everything is on a scale and yes, a hundred miles is a tremendous distance there because there’s so much in between, so much texture, so many trees, so many roads. There’s so much density of life. We don’t have much of that here. Even in our so-called cities, there are vast areas that are just vacant in a way. That’s also a theme, that vacancy, not just space—it’s emptiness too, and that’s an issue in poetry... I’ve lived there [in England] a lot. Some reviewers have referred to me as the most English poet, not just because of Keats and the Romantics, but just my feeling for the landscape, for a more intimate landscape, I think, than Whitman is looking at, something more closer to Dickinson, perhaps.

EXILE: Could that be also because of your sense of form?

PLUMLY: Perhaps. I pay much attention to the old values of line and form, that’s true.

EXILE: In terms of form, a friend of mine, a poet, was wondering why you choose, in *The Marriage in the Trees*, to write in blank verse?

PLUMLY: It’s the length, really, the time it takes, that’s what I’m after in a fourteen line poem. That’s our sort of haiku. Certain things are satisfied, certain kinds of moments, certain experiences, the saturation of emotion is just about that. It’s a deep restraint, but it’s a small restraint of experience. The sonnet-length poem can cover that. Rhythm, it seems to me, is an issue of assonance and consonance, near-rhythm; English is rich in that. That’s what I pay attention to, that music. With the decasyllabic line, even the blank verse line, that slants. That’s the chief way to look at the way I make a line. If it’s a sonnet, it still puts a tax on the length of the line, on the length of the poem, the length of the line breaks.

EXILE: I noticed in the reading the other day, you were counting.

PLUMLY: Was I?

EXILE: I couldn’t figure out what you were doing with your hands while you were reading. But you were counting out the sounds of the poems.

PLUMLY: I wasn’t conscious. I was counting. I was hearing it.

EXILE: I even asked David Baker if you played a musical instrument.

PLUMLY: No, I don’t. I’m totally deaf as it were to the technological aspects of playing music. Just hearing it.

EXILE: This is self-indulgent, but I was wondering if we could talk about a specific poem, “The Art of Poetry”? Just to continue the thoughts of music and hearing. The reason I told you I liked the poem so much is not because it’s about poetry, but because it’s about hearing. I have a hearing loss myself and I really felt a connection to that.

PLUMLY: It occurred to me one day, I guess I was thinking in the general territory, when I heard that radio interview with that woman [the hearing child of deaf parents]. It was fascinating to me, the problems of what deafness means. Perhaps in the literal sense, but also in the figurative sense, too, about being able to hear your experience, to hear your own tones, to hear other people that way, because everything is tone, and how valuable, how indispensable that is to poetry. There’s a lot of flat writing around today... It seems a lot of poets get by without any interest in the ear. What is it they’re after? What is the register of emotion they’re after? They’re looking for something else, I guess, but I’m not buying it. In a way, “The Art of Poetry” is the art of hearing. That’s what that poem is about for me.

EXILE: Me too. Another thing that seemed to be recurring in your poetry, along with hearing, is the trope of sleep. I used to be an insomniac. How does that figure into your work?

PLUMLY: It’s a subject, if you know what I mean by subject. It’s an issue, whatever we want to call it. More than that, I think it’s a way of perceiving the day, adding up the day, what Whitman calls “the tally.” Not that someone necessarily lies there and rehearses because you do that usually before you fall asleep, that’s a way to count what you did. Run through the narrative of the day, that’s a way to fall asleep. But it’s also what wakes you up, something that didn’t quite work right, something that didn’t get resolved, some fragment... The truth I found about sleep is that I love to sleep. I want to, but I’m not always sure what the difference is, what caused me to sleep well or not. A lot of people fear not sleeping, feel threatened by it. What I’ve learned is to embrace it and use it. In a way you sort of become your own ghost. You rise, but it’s not really you. It’s this other being who walks around and maybe reads a little bit, eats a little bit, turns on the TV and watches a movie you would never see any other time because there are all these other ghosts up. It’s a special time, that time of the day. You have to recognize that, accept it.

EXILE: Is it a way of eluding death?

PLUMLY: I suppose it has death all over it. You're more aware of your mortality at that hour. Everyone who has sort of thought about it recognizes that, recognizes it intuitively and doesn't say so because it's fearful. It is associated with death. Sleep is the great archetype of how death works, the allegory of the day—the morning is this season, and the afternoon is that season. At night I think you're never more alone. I've often wondered what it would be like to be with someone willing to wake up in the middle of the night, or who did wake up and without anyone complaints, said, "Let's talk," or, "God, it's great." I've never met anyone like that. The people I've been hanging around with always complain. That part's tricky, domestic life. Domestic life for the insomniac is more difficult.

EXILE: Talking about death, many of your poems are elegies. You said that Keats' odes are also really elegies.

PLUMLY: I think that they are, and I think that they all are coming out of that high moment, recovering as much as does from Tom's [Keats' brother] death, which is a rehearsal or revisiting of the death of his mother who he also tended. Here he is trained as a doctor who becomes the ultimate patient. At the time he writes the odes, he's moving into the patient phase. There are inklings that he's about to recognize that he's no longer the healer but the one who needs to be healed. That's also, I think, part of the complexities of the odes. Where does he stand, which side is he? The emotional subtext is, I think, Tom's death and its aftermath, not just the odes but the poems around that time, too, also figure into this whole emotional narrative.

EXILE: It seems to me that in Keats and in your poems there's that connection, that trying to hang onto what's lost.

PLUMLY: I think that's true, definitely. In my case that's true, the perishability of things. It's a form of longing, I suppose, one of the forms in which that longing manifested itself, the degree to which it's felt in various times, in various contexts. I think that's a wise perception, making connections, holding on.

EXILE: In your newer work, are you making the same kind of connections?

PLUMLY: Probably.

EXILE: I saw you had a big notebook of new poems

PLUMLY: It's not as big as it looks, mostly blank paper. There are a few poems in there. But yes, I think so. Maybe they're a little more muscular, more active in the world, less complex, a little more passive, if you will. I work very hard on them, actually. But I don't quite have...poems I want to write. I have a couple of those I want of the right magnitude. There's a certain neat, middle-ground magnitude that I need to have achieved in these

new poems, but I want to stretch that. I have sixteen new poems, but about twelve of them I really feel good about, solid about. Sometimes you don't know. You just don't know. You give it all out, but some of your poems, they were right, you were wrong. It's just that it wasn't what you thought you could get or wanted or needed. You trust it, but in fact, it was something else. You weren't able to see that, but the poem saw that.

—Alison Stine '00

World Cafe

One hand slap
in the World Cafe
where the rattle
of break-drums
and the bright-brewed
bubble of coffee
punctuate conversation

Five bar marimba intro
to an inquiry
about poetry
and the best way to integrate
rhythm and rhyme
in tambourine time

World Cafe
where bongos meet drum-set
(a 1960's creation)
and words
(which barricade)
are no longer necessary
in the two-four tempo
of maracas keeping peace

—Katie Kroner '01



“Untitled” by Amy Deaner '99

From Those Uninvolved

"There were four men in the house. It was a beautiful old house—vases, paintings, tapestries, it had everything. I can still remember it like it was yesterday," Grandpa scratched his unshaven chin.

"I think it was Teddy's idea to take that stuff." He nodded, agreeing with himself. "Those people won't miss 'em," Teddy said, 'and with the Germans coming, these houses are gonna be leveled in a couple of days anyway.'

"And I said—I'll never forget it—I said don't take that stuff, your wives would kill you if they knew how you got it.

"I left the mansion alone, for no one else was taking my advice. And as soon as I got out I heard them. A soft whistling at first, then a screaming, from the hills to the north. I knew instantly that the Germans had targeted the mansion."

"So what happened?" I asked with furrowed eyebrows, not used to unhappy endings.

"What do you think happened?" he answered dryly.

I was uncomfortable. I felt I had to say something.

"So did you ever tell Grandma that story?" I asked finally.

"Yes," Grandpa replied. "She asked what the vases looked like."

—Justin Walker '99

Gurney Surfer

It's a rush
of air across your face—
up the underside of nostrils flared
like cuffs of empty bell-bottoms—
a steady, skimming breeze that cools
the salty pool above the lip
wind over seawater

It's a push
from people like waves—
surgeons with foam-white masks
roar orders, wheels heard rumbling low

surf pummeling rocks

It's the crush-
ing weight on your chest
like water pressure, twelve-foot breakers
on your sternum, sky blue sheet
cinched tight

undertow
but more opaque than ocean

—Tom Hankinson '02

Japanese Beetles

In the garden, their skeletons eye me as I urge
 the shrimp-pink shoots of new growth.
 By the dozen I pinch and kill
 beetles off the tea roses, their armor
 of glazed oil, their eyes rusted shut. Seized
 with early morning killing, the blood fever
 of a sleepless night, I crush their exoskeletons. I leave them
 with the pruned, faulted blossoms to dry sun-hard.

However hard you squeeze

I squeeze back till that becomes
 a kind of contest I cannot win,
 a plunge into you with all
 the fervor manifested
 between bodily sheaves. I swim
 against hard flesh until it gives,
 until it lessens, drinking you,
 and even that is not enough.

I perfect my move:

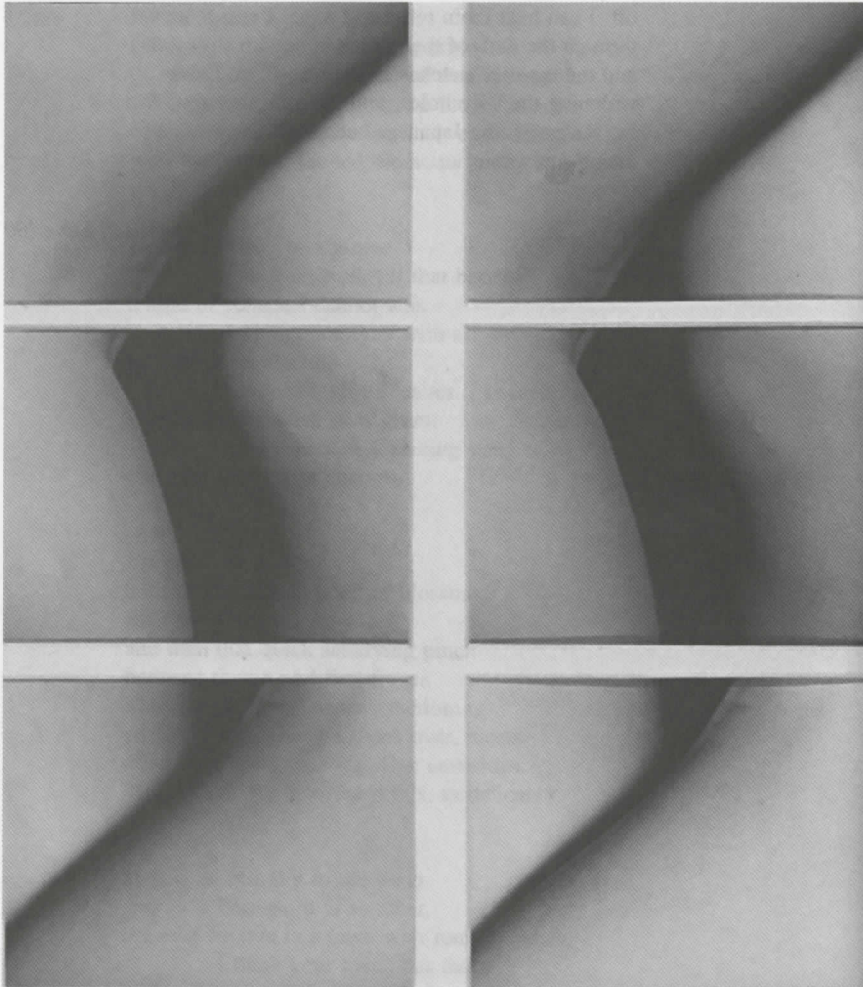
a dig in the cunted heart of blossom,
 flick for a moving target,
 and then that quick satisfying pinch
 between thumb and first finger.
 The crunch of soft organs suctioning
 shell, the crush as eye slides over, meets
 other eye, disassembling. Our casualties.
 They fall at my feet like petals, as delicate

as you, careful not to use teeth
 because it is summer,
 because we live in a town with four churches.
 I think your touch has more
 to do with the whole of my body,
 no tattooed hip
 roses of youth, no new flesh holes dark
 with bitter metal, no, not even ears.

When you leave with my mark
 on your flesh, I lie in bed with the sheets
 off. I can hear them returning
 through the dark of the garden
 and the tar-slick patches in the screen,
 widening the wire holes, tunneling
 the tea roses, the Japanese beetles,
 eating me whole.

—Alison Stine '00

Japanese Boots



"Perfect Knee" by David Tulkin '01

Frame

At night, the painter saw lights from the street reflected on the brass casing and thought "How beautiful," forgetting a dream about a man and a gun, the weak feeling in his legs. He forgot the object on his dresser was a bullet in a bottle. His sister lent him the bottle; it smelled of apricot. It was beautiful, simple. It was simple, innocent, shopping for a shower curtain to replace the one his sister called dirty. He told himself he was better off than the boy.

The boy had been shot a county away, in the right side. The painter heard as much and saw as much between flitting green bodies exchanging scalpels and clamps. He watched the boy's face turn red then white, as sweat or tears ran down his cheeks. "Jesus. Oh god. Jesus," went the boy. Then a curtain was pulled around the painter. He shut his eyes as the bullet from his back was removed.

"May I see it?" asked the old man, leaning over the counter and peering into the display case, his thick fingers smudging the glass. Richard set aside his book on life drawing—the class had been cancelled for several weeks. He found the right key in a ring of many, and awkwardly fit it into the lock. He sighed; he had felt ill since lunch.

"To be young and swift." The old man smiled, releasing a gust of cigar-tinged air. He was short, stout, with gray hair carelessly tossed on his crown. His gumball-white eyebrows curled at the ends, like the lapel on his trenchcoat. He eyed Richard through rounded lenses.

"A student, are you?" he asked, smiling and breathing heavily.

Richard wiped his forehead with his hand and slid open the display case. "A junior."

"A history major?"

"No. The place is my mom's. She loves antiques."

"And you are?"

"A cinema major."

"Excellent." His face continued to lighten as he spoke. Richard handed him the small camera, an eight millimeter Crown Royal. "I myself am a professor of cinema, emeritus."

The boy appeared at the hospital entrance, a ball of bloody and torn polyester. No ID. No wallet. No distinguishing marks, except for the tattoo on his ankle. A man with a catheter saw a black van driving too fast for the parking lot. The painter learned this from the nurse. The boy—when he had been stabilized, when the nose and earrings had been removed, when he had slipped into a thin gown and between cool, clean sheets—said nothing. He asked to see the bullet plucked from his flesh, and the nurse presented him with a small piece of metal in a plastic bottle.

"I wanted glass," said the boy.

The painter read a book his sister had purchased in the gift shop, *It Only Hurts When I Laugh*. The book contained works of art with humorous captions attached. He placed the book to his side and pressed his PCA, allowing morphine to swell his veins.

"I wanted glass," the boy said again. "Don't you think glass would be better?" He held the bottle out to the painter. "Want to see it?"

"Not really." The painter settled back into his bed and shut his eyes.

"Don't you think it's strange—you and me getting shot on the same day? That connects us, doesn't it?"

"Not really."

"Sure it does." The boy shook the bottle.

The painter opened one eye. "Don't, please."

"We have something in common."

The painter doubted him. What does the boy know about shower curtains? The painter went to the store for a shower curtain and was shot. That was all. Someone wanted the payroll, and he was shot.

"I didn't expect to end up here." The boy said his name was Roger, that it was his grandfather's name, that he hated it. He turned on his back and lifted the bottle to the light. "And it all revolves around this bullet. Comic book stores got us going. We were bored out of our skulls, nothing to do. They got all the expensive stuff in glass cases on the back wall. Like an autographed death of Superman."

The professor wandered through the shop, filled mostly with old books and odd bric-a-brac, like a metal ashtray made to resemble clogs, and a Hindenburg girder fashioned into a barstool. He looked through the camera's viewfinder and muttered to himself, as he passed a Daisy rifle and painted saw. "Is that a Vargas?" he asked of one of the prints hanging on the wall. Richard left the register and followed at a distance. He let his hands sink into the pockets of his jeans. His mother would not come in until five, and he was feeling nauseous and chilled. "Is there anything else you're looking for?" He tried to sound helpful, not anxious.

"What's this?" the professor set down the camera and picked up one of two cardboard binders with gilded covers. "Some sort of album?"

"A photo album." Richard retrieved the camera. "Is there anything you want?"

"I have a collection of these, tracing the family from the nineteenth century to the present, carefully organized and captioned. Photos of the children, the children's children." He let out another gust of tobacco air, and coughed heavily, louder than the wheezing laugh that accompanied his smile. "Fills a whole shelf in the den. Forty-some years of marriage on film."

Richard watched the man tilt his lenses to read the manufacturer's mark on the back. He watched the old man shift his weight from his left to his right leg, breath heavily and attempt to maintain a smile. "The actor James Stewart once called film 'pieces of time,' frozen slices of history. If only life were like that, still as a picture when you wanted it to be." Beads of sweat ringed the professor's gray hair, and Richard wondered why sweat was always described as resembling beads. Rosary beads? Sweat was more than the product of labor and a sign of anxiety; it could be the mark of suffering. Richard suffered this afternoon; the tuna fish sandwich he had consumed performed somersaults in his stomach.

"Is your mother an academician?"

"No." His mother was involved with the university. She was a poet. She inher-

ited the store from her uncle, who had been a professor of classics. But she was not. She spent her days antiquing, searching out old books, and writing things people never read. "My uncle was a professor of classics," he added.

"I see," the professor said. "A fine discipline. My wife can't read Greek, but she's full of pity and fear. It's a tragedy."

Richard tapped the top of a jelly jar.

"Cinema's going the way of epic poetry. With TV and the Internet and all."

"I don't know."

"Of course. You are a student of cinema. You have to find some value in it. But I owe it nothing." He placed down the binder. "May I have the camera back?"

"Do you want to buy it?"

"I think so." He coughed again and motioned Richard to hand over the camera. "It has a case," Richard said. "That will be..." But the professor bid him silent with a second wave of his hand and took the camera. "I'm not finished."

"Jude's been drinking, and Benny's smoking up, so I'm the only one with it when we sneak in the back way. I got the hammer and the black gloves." He stretched his hands to show the size of the lock. The painter watched Roger talk, watched the bandage on the boy's chest rise and fall with each word.

A sometime portrait painter, he found the boy's features common. A few scraggly hairs on the lower lip constituted a beard. He fared better with the sideburns, shaved close to the skin like his hair. He had a long, straight nose squared at the tip, high cheeks, and a weak chin that could be hidden by a better beard. The boy's skin was pale, but his temples were acne-scarred and flushed red. The painter knew the boy's silly story was not boasting. By the size of the boy's pupils, the moisture on the forehead and around the eyes, the way the ends of the lips curled with each word, the painter saw fear, perhaps shock. He said nothing. He pressed his PCA, but had exceeded his limit.

The day he was shot, the painter had worked on a portrait of a retired colleague, face puffed with pride. The painter saw something different, a glint of ambiguity in a gray eye. He focused on it, centered it, until the whole fleshy mass was anchored by eyes tinted with uncertainty. He covered his work and complained about his classes, the evils of the general education requirement. "General education." The painter would have sneered if the gesture fit his character, but he said everything smoothly. The colleague commiserated, but what did it matter, he was retired. His problems were not the painter's problems. The boy's problems were not the painter's problems.

The boy continued to talk. "While I'm working on the case with the expensive stuff, Jude and Benny are dumping boxes of comics into garbage bags, pouring them in." He talked about his delight in smashing glass. While he spoke, he clicked his teeth and forced a smile. They kept him on lower levels, feared making him an addict. The boy struggled just to speak. "Everything's going according to plan, and I start wondering why we brought guns."

"The cards, please." The cards were fifty rectangular photographs of screen stars, the second of a set of two produced by the Kromo Gravure PhotoCo. of Detroit, Michigan. Richard's mother had carefully arranged the cards within the display case, placing the

cardboard slip that once held them beside the stack, an ear-scratching, gun-toting Will Rogers carefully positioned on top. Charlie Chaplin, Lillian Gish, Douglas Fairbanks, and Fatty Arbuckle formed a half moon in front of the stack. "Of course, you know all about Roscoe. Tried to seduce a girl with a bottle of liquor; she died in the hospital from internal bleeding. They put her face on champagne bottles."

"I didn't know."

He shuffled through the cards and tilted his glasses to get a better look at the faded images. The pictures were black and white, but a previous owner had used paint to add a dash of color, so that Gish's lips were red and Wallace Reid's face the color of a tangerine. The professor smiled to himself, but Richard saw it was the smile of regret. "Time forgot most of them. Montague Love. Lila Lee. Ford Sterling. Who knew their faces graced the silver screen? Their films are probably rotting away in some studio vault, or burnt up years ago." A smile and a wheeze. "Fatty and his girl live on."

"BANG, I'm on the floor of the van, spilling blood everywhere. Jude just knocked the gun against his knee, and BANG. They panic, kick the stuff out of the back of the van, drop me here. And that's why I have this." He shook the bottle at the painter. "To remind me of their betrayal. To remind me to track those chickenshits down and see how they like a bullet in the back. Because betrayal, it's worse than getting shot. You know what I mean. It sucks."

The painter pressed his PCA and, with a soft, silly smile, watched the red-faced, ridiculous boy fade to black.

When he awoke, a curtain masked the boy's bed. Roger was gone. The nurse later told the painter that the boy's father had claimed him, that Roger and his friends had stolen the father's guns and gone deer hunting. The painter thought the tale dull, but remembered the bullet. When he was discharged, walking with a cane but walking, he asked for his bullet. He put the bullet in a glass bottle and placed the bottle on his dresser. When he looked at the bottle, he thought of the man with the gun but saw the face of the boy—story still spinning, lips twisting on lies. His art suffered. He did not sleep.

"Now, what I came for," he said, holding camera and cards tight against his chest, "was the furniture."

"We don't have much," Richard replied. "Just some homemade rockers on the second floor."

"I was thinking more of bedroom furnishings."

"Dressers?"

"More like a bed frame."

"What do you mean?" His stomach rumbled, and he brushed the hair from his forehead. "We don't have bed frames."

"An old Victorian thing? I know you do. My wife sold it to you. It's been in the family for generations."

"When was this?"

"Tuesday. Yes, I believe it was Tuesday. I had to go uphill that day. And when I returned, it was gone. All that remained was a mattress."

Richard thought the professor's wife must have been some kind of woman to

move the frame by herself. His mother had worked Tuesday, but he could not remember her mentioning any such purchase. "Are you sure she sold it to us?"

"She had to sell it to you. What other places are there? She sold you things in the past. I know. She thinks herself a dealmaker, a master in that art. She's always selling our things, small things usually, but always selling them for what she feels is a profit. It's an addiction with her. She can't help it."

"But here?"

"I know. I know it was here. You see, that day two other things went missing." He thrust the two objects he was holding in Richard's face. "My camera and these cards. She sold my things. My things."

Richard did not ask why. Like the professor, he was perspiring heavily. His ankles weighed him down. He wanted to close the deal before his mother arrived. The professor trembled, nearly hid the two objects within his coat. "She can't help it," he said. "It's an addiction, a disease. I've cut her off, you see. Removed her name from the account. Hid the key to the cabinet. She can't be trusted. She's spent so much. She gets money any way she can. And your mother always buys."

He looked sad behind his glasses and sweated heavily. His lips trembled, and his fingers stiffened around the cards and camera. He looked like a child who had said too much and awaited a punishment greater than embarrassment. Richard glanced at the register. "I can check the backroom."

The old man wiped his head with a handkerchief. He threw two 20 dollar bills on the display case and left the store. Richard picked up the bills and placed them in the register. He helped himself to a peppermint. Richard thought of the book he left by the register. He checked the backroom, but the frame was not there.

—Paul Durica '00

Shoveling

Without a claim on the snow coming down
 My back aches within the folds of the couch
 The cat yawns, adjusts the slant of her crown
 My will is measured by the degree that I slouch

My back aches within the folds of the couch
 The tangled white trees sink cold through my teeth
 My will is measured by the degree that I slouch
 Each buried layer cries for some kind of relief

The tangled white trees sink cold through my teeth
 As the shovel drips down the mug steams in reply
 Each buried layer cries for some kind of relief
 The cold draws in a breath as the fire dies

The cat yawns, adjusts the slant of her crown
 Without a claim on the snow coming down

—Bekah Taylor '00

Tobacco Country

I. Tobacco country.
 This stain is in everything.
 My skin. My eyes.
 Though I've never smoked or sniffed it,
 I believe it's even in my teeth.

II. There's an old woman inside me.
 Each day her presence is stronger.
 These scars are her triumph.
 Those wrinkles, her testimony
 to the hours one can spend
 with a photograph, in a field.

III. Surprising rises and sweeping valleys—
 My mother once likened it to a silk blouse
 thrown on the floor.
 She always did see a different sunrise.

IV. Damp puppy-dog whispers in my ear.
 I haven't giggled like that in years.
 Whoever said life was simple in the country
 did not live
 in the country.

—K. Moore '01

Winton Place

The street corners,
Populated with discarded lottery tickets,
Entice loitering.

The boys, not yet in high school, gulp
Their Mountain Dews in unison. They laugh
At the man who wears a black and orange
Hat and coat. He raises his head
To acknowledge their stares, then returns his gaze
To the liquor bottle, as his soiled hat bobs
To the broken walkman's silent music.

A shopping cart clatters, veering off course
At each whim of the cement. The man in the soiled hat
Guides the cart, full of forsaken pop cans,
Worth a nickel each. His head shifts
Left then right, guarding his fortune.
The boys, not yet in high school, finish
Their Mountain Dews in unison and

The empty cans take their
Place on the ground beside the
Discarded lottery tickets.

—Rachel Colina '02



"Untitled" by Amy Deaner '99

The Rose

She and I have been like brother and sister ever since I was seven years old—Rosie, I mean. I guess I needed a substitute sibling since I didn't have a real one, and she had a handful of older sisters but no brothers, so maybe she wanted an icky little boy to boss around. I was the one she picked. Not that I was anything special. My only virtue was convenience. Our houses shared a backyard fence, and the next icky boy lived way down the block. But sometimes I liked to imagine she had been drawn to me by a force, like magnets or static cling. For one thing I had a sandbox in my back yard, rare in my neighborhood, and for another I had it on the authority of my grandmother that I was cute as a button. That was very encouraging—well, until I got a look inside her button box. If those specimens were her basis of comparison, then I was about as good-looking as a bulbous disc covered in stained old tweed. Still, there was the sandbox. And Rosie didn't seem to mind my being a bit round and smudged.

Her full name was:

"Rosemary Lynn Wade. What's yours?"

"Pete."

"No, I mean your *whole* name."

"Peter Keith MacIntyre."

It was the brightest, stickiest part of July, and we met, naturally, over the backyard fence. I had been gouging holes into the flowerbed along its base with Grammy's gardening trowel—Grammy was the one I lived with—and when I looked up from my work I found Rosie standing there. I had seen her before, coming and going from her house, and occasionally at school, but we had never actually spoken until she appeared that day and wanted to know what I was doing.

"Digging," I answered, sitting back on my heels.

"What for?"

"Bugs," said the part of me that couldn't help trying to make her go away. It was hard to enjoy getting dirty when a Rosemary Lynn Wade was staring down with her arms crossed, looking like she might just go rat on you.

"Can I come over?" she asked. I thought about this for a second, then nodded. She immediately scaled the low split-rail fence, and I cringed when I saw her foot slip as she turned to come back down on my side. The inevitable shot through my mind: she would fall, she would cry, Grammy would come running, and I would get *such* a time of it for rooting up the flowers. But I underestimated her in my ignorance, because apart from a grunt, nothing happened when she hit the ground. She just brushed off the dirt, gave her head a shake to straighten her short brown hair, and poked an inquisitive finger into the hole I had dug.

Well, I was impressed.

"Do you like worms?" I hazarded. "I've got one." I showed her an empty coffee can with my discovery writhing fretfully on the bottom. Wrinkling her nose, she took the can from me and reached inside. "Disgusting," she said, with the worm flipflopping on her palm in the sun. She picked it up between two fingers for a closer look, unafraid. I had just held it at arm's length on the trowel.

And that was all it took. I think we saw each other every day the rest of that summer, at least after I was done being grounded for digging up some prized tulip bulb or other. The Blue Tulip. I capitalized it in my mind because Grammy made it sound like an object of worship. I used to tell Rosie—that's what I always called her, even when she wanted to be "Mary-Lynn"—that someday I'd open a restaurant and name it The Blue Tulip. And then we'd snicker and play Restaurant: she would be the elegant lady coming in for a light lunch, and I'd be the waiter.

"What may I serve you, ma'am?" I'd say. And she would order petunia pie, snapdragon soufflé and rose water, and pay the bill with blades of grass.

I should have guessed we'd end up doing theatre. Rosie was certainly dramatic from the first moment she came crashing over the fence into my life, and both of us imaginative. My first foray into acting came when the Paul Lawrence Dunbar High School Thespians put on *The Crucible*. I was about fifteen, I guess, because it was my sophomore year there. I had joined the club as a freshman, but since I didn't have the guts then to actually audition, I instead made props and moved sets for that year's rather amateurish productions: *Alice in Wonderland* and *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*. But Mrs. Gilbert, our aging director, decided to retire that year, and when fall rolled around the troupe found itself led by a thirty-something bundle of energy and will called Beverly Brennan. Instead of bifocals and a penchant for the fluffy, she had a *vision*. Our piano player Jim, for years a fixture in every sugary show, found himself nonplussed when she announced that instead of the usual cheerful orphans and singing princesses we would be delving into hysteria, lechery and Drama with a capital D.

I so desperately wanted a part that it was just about silly, so Rosie became a Thespian too in order to be moral support for me while I took the plunge and auditioned. To our surprise, we both got a part. Bev—who actually refused to be called Mrs. Brennan—believed in giving everyone a chance on stage, and she had a knack for coaxing out of you whatever raw talent you possessed. By opening night I was a pretty decent Second Nameless Puritan in the courtroom scene, and Rosie—good lord, Rosie! She was cast as the scheming wench Abigail Williams, one of the lead roles, and she was brilliant.

I remember watching her during rehearsals, venomously threatening the other Puritan girls not to reveal their goings-on in the woods of Salem. The way she said "I will bring ye a pointy reckoning that will shudder ye!" shuddered *me*. But the best bit was listening from the wings during the real performances. When Rosie was at her best, the auditorium was *silent*. No gum wrappers crumpling, no restlessness in the seats. I wish I could describe what it's like to see a whole audience riveted by talent they never would have expected on a high school stage. All I can tell you is that I didn't want it to end. I wanted stunned, soundless awe in place of applause, and I wanted to savor it, stretching on endlessly with Rosie at its center. Even now, a decade plus-a-bit later, I sometimes get the crazy wish that it was still going.

It couldn't, though. We graduated, then went to our separate colleges and graduated again, and then got our masters' in theatre. I missed her during college and beyond, although we always saw each other over the holidays. Even when she was right there in

front of me, watching TV in Grammy's living room or wrapping Christmas presents in her parents' basement, I couldn't help thinking ahead to when she would want to live in New York, where the real theatre action was. My best friend in the world—and I'd only get to see her if I went there and bought a front-row ticket. It was decidedly depressing.

I remember when I got the news. I was in the bathtub when the phone rang, and I had to climb out and open the door a tiny, modest crack to take the receiver from Grammy.

"Hi Pete, it's me. Guess what!" Rosie's voice was higher than normal with excitement.

"What?" I asked, sloshing back into the tub.

"Guess," she said.

"I have no idea." I had lost my washcloth and was distractedly trying to recover it without getting the phone in the water.

"Oh come on, take a guess."

"You found a cure for rodent obesity?"

"No!" she laughed. "I got an apartment and a job."

I dropped the washcloth again and didn't care where it went.

"New York, Peter!" she continued. "New York! Think of it!"

"Congratulations," I managed. It sounded dumb. "What kind of job?"

"Promise not to laugh."

"I promise," I said automatically.

"Well—it's at a florist's. Don't ask—I just saw the ad and thought it would be better than waiting tables. And the apartment—well, it's not an apartment really, not a big one, only two rooms, but it'll do..."

She chattered on excitedly, and I thought, *Well, that's that.*

As for me, I've always stayed here—Columbus, Ohio. I realized early on that I wasn't meant for the stage like she was: my place was behind it, moving sets, finding props, running lights. And most of all, stage managing. I loved it—I still love it. It's what I do. My business card says *9th Muse Community Theatre, Peter K. MacIntyre, Stage Manager*. It's me who drills the stage crew on changing the scenery in the shortest possible time, and me who directs them over the headsets during the performances. It's me who gets the actors off their backs, sometimes putting out their cigarettes myself and giving them a shove—polite but firm—to make their cues on time. I don't yell. Polite but firm gets you much more respect. I roam the whole backstage, sometimes running. I am everywhere all at once; I am the link between performers and audience, hearing both perspectives and making them mesh. My greatest pride is knowing that if I were not there, the shows I manage would fall apart.

I've tried to pattern myself as much as possible after the example Bev gave us back at Dunbar—the commitment to good theatre that made her lay down an entire floor of rough pine planks with real dirt between the cracks for us Puritans to walk, pray, scream and moralize over. She was also ruthless, of course. She could make you agree to be on the publicity committee, sew costumes and bake refreshments before you even realized you'd opened your mouth. My own lack of ruthlessness has probably kept me from achieving all I could have by now—like convincing my boss to let me direct a show, I mean *really* direct—but I'm trying to make it in my own less-forceful way. Maybe I

could be in New York too, if I had wanted it—if I had tried. But I've taken things slowly, steadily, and I am where I am.

And then, suddenly, Rosie was here too.

I tried not to be too glad about it. Running out of money and patience, having a panicky breakdown of sorts, suddenly hating New York and moving back home was nothing to be glad about. I knew it meant her dreams were on hold. But she was back, and I couldn't help smiling when I thought of it.

Bev Brennan had a daughter, Diane, the same age as Rosie and me. She was well-known around school for two reasons, one of them her mother's theatrical successes. But Diane was actually far better known—I almost said notorious—for her relationship with Randall T. Bender. By our senior year, Diane and Randy had been together so long that they were practically proverbial. In any case, I can't say I was surprised when, one autumn afternoon in 1998, a large envelope of creamy, nobbly, expensive paper showed up in my mailbox, wherein Mr. and Mrs. William Brennan cordially invited me to a reception in honor of their daughter Diane Elizabeth, upon the occasion of her marriage to Randall Thomas Bender.

My only recent knowledge of the couple had come through the rumor mill: something about both having just about finished medical school. I hadn't even known they wanted to be doctors—I wasn't close with either one at Dunbar. I figured it must have been Bev who included me—and Rosie too, I soon found out—on the guest list for the big event. Though I wasn't certain I'd even recognize Randy any more, and Rosie had never really cared much for Diane, Bev-loyalty outweighed our indifference to the couple enough for us to R.S.V.P in the affirmative.

"Pete, I don't think I'm going to go to this thing after all."

It was the day before the wedding, and when the phone rang I suspected it would be a problem. I was right.

"What? But you R.S.V.P'd. They've got a place card with your name on it and everything."

"I know, but nobody'll miss me except Bev, and she'll be too busy to really care."

"And what am I supposed to do? Talk to myself all night? I had you written in my dance card," I wheedled.

"You'll be all right, Pete. Anyway, you know I don't dance. That's your thing."

"But why don't you want to go?"

Silence.

"Rosie, you still there?"

"Yeah. Look, I just don't want to, OK?"

"But—" I stopped and thought. "Hey, are you busy right now?"

"Yes, I'm on the phone."

"You know that's not what I mean."

"I'm about to make dinner. Why?"

"Well, I was thinking maybe I could come over—"

"And change my mind?" she interrupted darkly.

"Maybe," I admitted. "What are you making?"

"Stir-fry. Come over if you want but I'm not going." Click.

I frowned and hung up the receiver. There were times when Rosie mystified me, and they tended to involve weddings. For instance—that job of hers in New York, at the florist's, where she wrestled buds and leaves into shape when she wasn't auditioning or rehearsing.

"I despise wedding bouquets," she told me over the phone during one of our occasional long-distance catch-up sessions.

"But I thought you were good at them," I said.

"I am. But I hate them."

"Don't you like flowers?"

"I wouldn't work there if I didn't like flowers," she said snappishly. "Well, maybe I would. I don't know what else I'd do to pay the bills."

"Then what's the problem?"

"Hell, I don't know. I just can't stand them. All day nothing but bouquets and church altar decorations and runners for down the aisle and boutonnieres and corsages, and they all look so goddamn alike."

I laughed. "Well, they're supposed to. It wouldn't be much of a wedding if one bridesmaid had a little sprig of something and another was frowning under an enormous bunch of something else."

"It's stupid," Rosie continued, obviously not interested in my opinion. "Ripping up flowers and making them behave and be orderly when they would probably be much happier left alone in the dirt."

"Whatever you say, dear," I had said.

And then, of course, the whole business with Bill, which I just couldn't understand. They were nothing alike. Talk about making things behave and be orderly—that was his whole life, as far as I could tell, and yet there she was, wearing his diamond ring. Mystifying. Granted, I only met the guy once, but I didn't like what I saw. When she came back home, he went along for some reason, saw her safely to her new, cheap, hometown apartment, stayed a few days and went back to New York to keep an eye on his accounts and wait for her to return for the wedding. Rosie invited me over while he was there, for a housewarming/homecoming/boyfriend-soon-to-be-leaving type of thing.

"Bill," she said, hanging onto his arm in a strangely un-Rosie-like way, "I'd like you to meet Peter." She seemed nervous, either wanting me to like him or wanting him to like me, I wasn't sure which.

We shook hands and eyed each other. I believe he may have said, "It's a pleasure," but I was too busy eyeing to be sure. Crisp shirt, dark slacks. No tie. Shiny tasseled loafers and a same-color belt. Gold watch. Dark hair, recently combed. Shifty eyes (I thought). Not unattractive from a woman's point of view, I supposed, but my own impulse was to dislike him. I wondered what he was thinking about me: *shirt not ironed, non-matching pants, scuffed shoes, flyaway hair, been eating too many McBurgers. We*

both flashed a toothy smile and I had a feeling he didn't like me either.

"So, Bill," I said, when we were sitting around the living room with drinks and h'ors d'oeuvres. "How did you two meet?" Rosie had already told me but I felt like making him talk. I waited till he had his mouth full, too.

"Well," he said, clearing his throat and swallowing hastily, "My accounting firm does the books for Rosie's agency, and we ran into one another there. Literally. I spilled my coffee on her and took her to lunch to make up for it, and it all just happened. Four months later, here we are." He gave her the grin, and she actually *simpered*.

"I hear you've known each other a long time," he said to me.

"Twenty years," I said. "When's the wedding?"

"As soon as we can get all the arrangements made," he answered. "Right, honey?" Rosie just smiled.

I felt nauseous remembering it on the way to her apartment. Not wanting to show up in a bad mood, since it would hurt my chances of changing her mind, I made myself think of something else—but only ended up humming the Rosie Song. I'd heard it on the radio in high school—a chain-gang-marching-around kind of song. When I told her about it, she made me sing it for her. It was a summer night, the weekend Grammy was away for her annual church women's convention, and we were sitting around under the backyard maple tree with an illicit six-pack. We weren't drunk, but we were in a silly enough mood and laughing so much that we thought we must be. So I sang it for her, marching around dragging one leg and clanking two beer cans to sound like chains:

Be my woman, girl, I'll be your man,

Be my woman, girl, I'll be your man,

My Rosie—when I'm free—

My Rosie—when I'm free!

Stick to the promise, girl, that you made me,

Stick to the promise, girl, that you made me.

My Rosie—when I'm free—

My Rosie, when I'm free!

We had ended up collapsed in the grass, snickering till the tears fell. That was another moment in my life that I wanted never to end.

"Hello," Rosie said, ushering me through her front door. "I knew you wouldn't be able to resist mooching a meal off me."

"What can I say, Rosie, you know your way around a wok."

"And you, as we know, wouldn't know a wok if it smacked you in the head," she added. "I don't know how you survive. Do you eat at all?"

"The odd twig and berry. Bits of bark, you know." I followed her to the kitchen and availed myself of an open box of crackers on the counter. Rosie was rooting around in a cabinet and swearing under her breath.

"Joyce Chen pan gone AWOL?" I asked.

"No, the rice steamer. Half of it, anyway. I can't find the lid."

"So use a saucepan."

She sat back on her heels and said pointedly, "I believe we already established that you know less than nothing about the culinary arts."

"That's not true," I said, "I make excellent Kraft Macaroni and Cheese."

"That is not art."

"Perhaps," I said. "But it's the cheesiest."

"No, *you're* the cheesiest. You're a block of sharp Wisconsin cheddar. Quit eating my Wheat Thins and look in that cupboard, would you?"

"I hear and obey," I said, and took a look. "This wouldn't be it, would it?" I held up a flattened bamboo object that had been smashed under an iron skillet.

"Damn," said Rosie. "I'll need a saucepan after all."

She clattered around for a while with pots and woks and oil and peapods, and I settled myself on one of the bar stools by the counter.

"Be a dear and clean those, would you?" Rosie asked, pointing at a plastic-wrapped Styrofoam container of muddy mushrooms. She pulled a brush of some sort out of a drawer and tossed it in my direction.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" I asked, turning it over in my fingers. "Groom their spores?"

"Brush off the dirt," she said. "Then rinse, but take it easy so they don't get too soggy."

"Well, all right," I said dubiously, and broke open the plastic wrap. Meanwhile Rosie got out a cleaver and started whacking a frozen piece of chicken into strips.

"So talk to me," she said after a minute. "Or else put some music on. Or both. It's too quiet in here—it makes me think you're plotting something."

"What do you want to listen to?" I asked.

"I don't care. Pick something."

I brushed my hands together to get the mushroom-gunk off and fished through Rosie's tumbled-together box of CDs in the living room. Nothing looked too appealing. *Cabaret*—probably too cheerful. Mozart's *Requiem*—too morbid. *Earth, Wind and Fire*—hell no! I settled on something jazzy and returned to my mushrooms.

"I despise this CD," Rosie said, when the first song came on. "It's nothing but whiney soprano sax spiraling all over the place as if it had nothing better to do. That and the occasional cymbal clang."

"Then why'd you buy it?"

"I didn't, it was a present from Bill. He has horrible taste in music. He actually owns every single Yanni album, can you imagine?"

"Lord save us," I said.

"Well, exactly. I'm trying to think of some little 'accident' to get rid of them. A box knocked out the window of the apartment or something."

"I've been meaning to ask you about that," I said. "How come you didn't just move in with him when you lost your job? Didn't he have the space?"

"It wasn't a question of *space*," Rosie said, stirring her sizzling chicken strips somewhat ferociously. "I just didn't, is all."

"But how come?"

"Must we talk about this?" She grabbed the box of rice from the counter and measured some into her boiling water, then smacked a lid onto the pot with a clang.

"I didn't know it was that big a deal," I said. "I'm sorry."

"It's not a big deal, I just..." She put down her cooking spoon and pushed her hair back from her face. "I just didn't want to be depending on him."

"He's your fiancé," I said. "You'd have been depending on each other."

"No," said Rosie. "He has a job, I didn't. Except for my old job here to come back to. Anyway, it doesn't matter. I'm not—I wasn't ready. But I will be. Aren't you finished with those mushrooms yet?"

"Oh," I said. "Yeah, sorry. Here." I pushed the container across the counter. In the background, the soprano sax began a prolonged wail, rather like the siren of a fire engine.

"I can't take it," Rosie said. She wiped her hands on a dishtowel and went to pick another CD. Something mellow—Enya, I thought. An ethereal voice like a summer midnight.

"Does Bill ever sing you the Rosie Song?" I asked when she returned to the kitchen.

"What, Simon and Garfunkel?" She pulled up a stool next to me. "'Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme'?"

"No, not that—the chain gang one. 'Be my woman, girl.'"

She looked amused. "God, I haven't thought of that in so long. I can't even picture him singing it. He's not really the singing type."

"What type is he?"

"The *non*-singing type, obviously," she answered, sounding irritated.

"Oh. I didn't know there was such a type."

"Not everybody's a theater person, Peter. Most of the world isn't, you know."

"That doesn't mean they can't sing and dance and enjoy themselves," I protested.

"Oh, Bill enjoys himself. He just doesn't sing."

"Does he dance?"

"I don't know. But that's only because I don't like it myself, so we never have."

"Well, you'll have to dance at the reception tomorrow," I said craftily.

"Peter Keith, I am *not* going to the reception tomorrow."

There was a sudden hissing noise from the stove as Rosie's rice boiled over into the flames.

"Holy hell!" she yelped, jumping up. "I left the burner on high. *Goddamn*."

Enya did all the talking after that until the pots and pans and plates were on the table.

"This is really good, Rosie," I said, tasting a bite. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," she answered quietly. And then added hurriedly, "Look, I'm sorry I snapped at you so much before. You know I'm glad you came over, don't you?"

"Yeah," I said. "You're just stressed, I understand."

"This isn't where I imagined myself at age almost-twenty-eight..."

"You don't have to explain, not to me," I said.

"I know," she said. "I'm just explaining to myself."

"How long's it been since you saw Bev?" I asked.

She sighed and said, "Very long."

We fell silent again, but it was the comfortable silence of friends familiar enough with each other not to require a solid stream of words. Finally, Rosie ate the last mushroom from the pan and asked,

"So what are you wearing to this thing?"

I grinned, knowing that meant she had changed her mind about not going.

"I don't want us to be conspicuous," she added.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe my gray slacks."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" She twitched an eyebrow. "They're awfully tight. Maybe you better wait on those until they invent the pants equivalent of a shoehorn for your fat ass."

"My what?"

"Your. Big. Fat. Ass. Although 'fat' doesn't do you justice. It fails," she said, waving her fork expressively, "to encompass the vastness—the sheer *scope* of your posterior region. I say *region* to evoke the geographical connotations which are, of course, a *propos*. Each cheek a continent, each dimple a country."

I bore this placidly, knowing she was just trying to annoy me into saying, "Maybe you *should* stay home after all." Ok, so I could have stood to lose a few pounds, but even at my largest I could *never* be, as she proceeded to suggest, a peach for Halloween.

"No costume necessary. Just bend over. Shall I demonstrate?" She twisted around and stuck her butt out.

I ignored her. "I have to get going—work to do. I'll pick you up at five-thirty."

She twitched an eyebrow, then moved to the stove and scraped at one of the burnt rice blobs while I put on my coat.

"Don't wear that damn purple shirt," she said. "I'm not going if you look like a blueberry."

I ignored that too.

She was right, though—my sense of style was terrible and we both knew it. So as usual, I showed up at her door with various possibilities and she chose the things that looked the least awful. She herself had not yet dressed, unless, I thought to myself, sweatpants were a new fashion trend. She made her selections and sent me off to change.

"There now," she said as I exited the bathroom, "you look more or less presentable. Remember this. Dark slacks, light shirt. Not the other way around."

"Yes, master," I said in my best fawning sycophant voice.

"Did you put gel in your hair?" she accused, frowning.

"Just a little. It was sticking out."

"Peter Keith! What have I told you about that?"

"Greasy mob boss," I said tiredly.

"Exactly." She fluffed my sticky locks until they projected outwards from my scalp in various unnatural, but, she assured me, terribly stylish directions.

"Now don't touch and you should be fine," she said. "Let me throw something on and then we can go."

I surreptitiously flattened a few of the spikier areas while she disappeared into her bedroom, and thankfully she didn't notice—or if she did, she let it go, since I was complimenting her on the outfit she had put on. I don't know whether it was a *dress* or a *gown*, because I'm bad at these distinctions, but whatever it was, it was black, sparkly

and damn cool, and I said so.

"Thanks, dear. Now come on, let's get this thing over with."

The wedding reception was—well, it was a wedding reception. A rented ballroom at the local Radisson, stiff starched tablecloths, a DJ in a too-tight suit consulting his music lists: sappy songs, happy songs, songs for when people start getting drunk. A gift table piled with things in silver-white paper, a catered buffet steaming under silver domes, and little glasses of wine at each place to toast the bride and groom. Diane, I recalled, hadn't been interested in anything that, to me, was *Bev*: the bold, the avant garde, in a word, the theatrical. So I guessed I was seeing the daughter's hand in the pale, milky candles, fake pearl garlands and assorted flowery things that littered the room, all of them festooned or beribboned or otherwise foofied up with the peachy theme color of the Brennan-Bender nuptial feast.

"This is my idea of hell," Rosie whispered to me as we sat at our assigned table amidst a handful of apparently random people, taking furtive sips of the wine before the newlyweds arrived. "Just look at this." She flicked a fingernail against one of the ivy vines hanging off the wad of lilies and peach netting that formed a centerpiece. "I feel like I'm in a Disney movie. Like one of those old ones with the girl from *The Parent Trap* where everything's all happy and covered with bows."

"Hayley Mills?" I said.

"Right, her. *Pollyanna*, that's what I was thinking of. It's goddamn *Pollyanna*."

"Well, it's only for a few hours."

"I'm not doing this at my wedding," Rosie added, snapping an ivy leaf off the vine. "I don't like ruffles and bows and I hate this gauzy blissful tulle fabric crap."

"Aren't you cheerful this evening!"

"The ivy's not so bad," she continued, ignoring me. "I think I'll have a green wedding. I'll have the reception outside and make everyone come dressed as woodland sprites."

"Including Bill?"

"Especially Bill. Green tights—what do you think?"

"Fat chance," I said, sipping my wine. "Unless they're pinstriped."

"Shut up!" She tossed her crumpled leaf onto the tablecloth and pulled off another one. "You barely know him."

There was a sullen pause for some three minutes, until the wedding photographer shoved his telephoto lens into our faces and demanded us to smile.

"Maybe I'll just get married in blood-red velvet," Rosie continued darkly after he wandered off to accost more of the unsuspecting. "With a plunging neckline and stiletto heels. And for a bouquet, a single black rose tied with a black ribbon. None of this *white* shit."

"Excuse me a minute," I said, avoiding comment by taking our now-empty wine glasses to the open bar for a refill. On the way I ran into the mother of the bride herself, beaming happily in a long electric blue dress and some sort of matching turban.

"Pete MacIntyre!" she cried, and enveloped me in one of her huge, crushing

We fell silent again, but it was the comfortable silence of friends familiar enough with each other not to require a solid stream of words. Finally, Rosie ate the last mushroom from the pan and asked,

"So what are you wearing to this thing?"

I grinned, knowing that meant she had changed her mind about not going.

"I don't want us to be conspicuous," she added.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe my gray slacks."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" She twitched an eyebrow. "They're awfully tight. Maybe you better wait on those until they invent the pants equivalent of a shoehorn for your fat ass."

"My what?"

"Your. Big. Fat. Ass. Although 'fat' doesn't do you justice. It fails," she said, waving her fork expressively, "to encompass the vastness—the sheer *scope* of your posterior region. I say *region* to evoke the geographical connotations which are, of course, a *propos*. Each cheek a continent, each dimple a country."

I bore this placidly, knowing she was just trying to annoy me into saying, "Maybe you *should* stay home after all." Ok, so I could have stood to lose a few pounds, but even at my largest I could *never* be, as she proceeded to suggest, a peach for Halloween.

"No costume necessary. Just bend over. Shall I demonstrate?" She twisted around and stuck her butt out.

I ignored her. "I have to get going—work to do. I'll pick you up at five-thirty."

She twitched an eyebrow, then moved to the stove and scraped at one of the burnt rice blobs while I put on my coat.

"Don't wear that damn purple shirt," she said. "I'm not going if you look like a blueberry."

I ignored that too.

She was right, though—my sense of style was terrible and we both knew it. So as usual, I showed up at her door with various possibilities and she chose the things that looked the least awful. She herself had not yet dressed, unless, I thought to myself, sweatpants were a new fashion trend. She made her selections and sent me off to change.

"There now," she said as I exited the bathroom, "you look more or less presentable. Remember this. Dark slacks, light shirt. Not the other way around."

"Yes, master," I said in my best fawning sycophant voice.

"Did you put gel in your hair?" she accused, frowning.

"Just a little. It was sticking out."

"Peter Keith! What have I told you about that?"

"Greasy mob boss," I said tiredly.

"Exactly." She fluffed my sticky locks until they projected outwards from my scalp in various unnatural, but, she assured me, terribly stylish directions.

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hugs.

"Bev, I'm so glad to see you!" I said, wheezing slightly as she squeezed the air out of my lungs. "Congratulations, it's about time they got married."

"Isn't it though!" she agreed. "I started dropping hints about grandkids to comfort me in my dotage and they finally caught on."

I laughed. "Dotage? Bev, if you don't go by years you're the youngest woman in this room. You look great, by the way. I like the dress."

"Dress!" she scoffed. "It's a caftan, darling. I'm aiming for something a la Gloria Swanson. And aren't you the handsome one, too!" she added, looking me over.

"Thanks," I said shyly. "Rosemary picked out the clothes."

"Did she! Well, the girl has an eye. Is she here yet?"

I nodded. "She's over there." I pointed.

"Not looking the most cheerful, I see," Bev mused. "I heard about her rough times. I can't understand it. She was *so* good. This is why I hate New York," she said firmly. "Might as well throw yourself to ravenous jackals. Oh, excuse me, the DJ is beckoning. Go take that girl a drink and make her enjoy herself."

"I'm trying," I assured her.

I resumed my place at Rosie's side, armed with fresh glasses of wine. A little pile of torn ivy had developed on the tablecloth during my absence. She scooped it up and deposited it back into the centerpiece as I sat down.

"Thank God," she said, pouncing on the new wine glass. "I'm bored out of my mind. None of these people has said a word yet, not one stinking word. I don't appreciate being stuck in with the rejects and loners, not at all. What time is it? Shouldn't they be here by now?" "They" meant Mr. and Mrs. Bender, the only trace of whose presence so far was their gold-lettered names entwining on the peach matchbook covers scattered around the tables. Rosie had one in her hand.

"Quarter of seven," I said. "They're probably smooching in the limo."

"Would you marry someone called Randy Bender?" Rosie asked, pondering the matchbook. "I wouldn't."

"Well, I'm sure Bill will be glad to hear it. Were you about to light those leaves on fire?"

"No," she said defensively.

"You were, weren't you."

Silence.

"Rosemary!"

"Well, maybe. Not actually. I wouldn't *actually* have done it. I mean, really. It was merely a fantasy."

Merely a fantasy? Bracing myself for her reaction, I said a bit severely, "Would you please snap out of it? Honestly, Rosie, if you don't want to get married, give him back the damn diamond and stop all this moping around!"

I thought flames were going to shoot from her eyes.

"What are you talking about? I love Bill. I wouldn't have said yes if I didn't intend to go through with it so just shut up!" She kept her voice to a whisper but enunciated fiercely.

"All right, all right, calm down," I said. "I was just taking a guess."

Further expostulation on Rosie's part was prevented by a sudden outburst of applause heralding the grand entrance of the newlyweds. She channeled the residual wrath into her clapping, the supersonic sort before which mortal eardrums quail. I expected accompanying gnashing of teeth, but as Diane and Randy paraded by she gave them a warm smile at odds with her reddening palms.

Thank God for wedding cake and champagne, that's all I can say. Things remained more or less terse at our table throughout the toasting and the buffet, and it wasn't until Rosie and I had ingested some sugary icing and imbibed some fairly decent bubbly that she forgot to keep on being annoyed.

Meanwhile, the DJ broke out the sappy songs in full force.

"Ladies and gentlemen," his voice boomed through the speakers, trailed by a screech of feedback: "May I present, in their first dance, Mr. and Mrs. Bender!"

The photographer and his spotlight-wielding lackey maneuvered to catch the bride's shy smile as Randy took her by the hand. He led the way to the dance floor through a cloud of polite applause, and they stood together at its center, awaiting the music. Diane's satin gown glowed, reflecting flickers of candlelight gently diffused by yards of veiling.

"Pollyanna or not," I whispered, "you have to admit she looks beautiful." Rosie didn't answer.

The DJ pushed a button and an awful, sugary, sentimental song began. I can't remember exactly what song; memory has mercifully blocked the details.

Lyrics lyrics awful sappy lyrics... (whatever they were.)

Rosie and I gave each other an appalled sort of a look.

Lyrics lyrics even more awful lyrics

"Good lord," I said. "Can you believe *that's* going to be their song for the *rest of their lives!*"

"Horrible," Rosie answered. "I think we're going to need more champagne."

I agreed, and we drowned our sorrows for the next two songs. But the first notes of the third one made me smile even as Rosie grimaced, or maybe *because* she grimaced.

Some say love / It is a river / That drowns the tender reed...

"Now we *have* to dance," I said, grinning.

"No, we do not."

Some say love / It is a razor / That leaves the soul to bleed...

"But it's your name-song," I said. "One of them anyway."

Rosie didn't reply, but I could tell she was considering.

Some say love / It is a hunger / An endless aching need...

"My name is not The Rose."

"Well, close enough." I stood up and held out my hand.

I say love / It is a flower / And you its only seed.

"Oh, all right!" She crumpled up her napkin and dropped it on the table. "If you're going to twist my arm." I led the way to an open space among the couples on the dance floor, and silently we began to sway along with them.

"Sometimes," I said, searching for a non-inflammatory topic to break the silence, "I wish we were still in my backyard, you know? Pulling bugs out of the flowerbed like when we first met."

Rosie nodded. "I remember you so exactly from that day. You had on a shirt with green stripes. And you were grubby and sweaty and repellent."

"I was harmonizing with nature, thank you."

"You can't harmonize with something that doesn't care whether you live or die. All you can do is be glad it's indifferent instead of vindictive."

She always did know how to kill a conversation.

"If I was Thoreau I'd smack you in the head for that."

"And if I was Joseph Conrad I'd kick your ass. In fact, Peter, I'm not so sure the world is even all that indifferent. Lately it strikes me as downright vindictive."

She sighed grimly. I held her a bit closer and just danced. I've been told I dance very well—and not just by my grandmother, either. Back in the school days, while anticipating a dance or a party, I could sing "I got music, I got rhythm" without feeling hypocritical, even if "I got my gal, who could ask for anything more" tended to subside into a self-conscious hum. But I digress. When I led my prom dates out onto the floor of the gym, or approached a girl in the seething college crowd at homecoming, some instinct always arose—and practice, training, even thought all became unnecessary. That was true as Rosie and I danced. If I had thought about it, I couldn't have said I was leading, or that she followed. Somehow, it was irrelevant.

I found myself singing along quietly as the song ended:

*When the nights have been too lonely / And the road has been too long
And you think that love is only / For the lucky and the strong...*

"Sing it, Bette," said Rosie dryly.

Just remember in the winter / Far beneath the bitter snow

Lies the seed that with the sun's love / In the spring becomes the Rose.

"Don't look so unhappy," I whispered as the last notes died away. She just smiled ruefully and shrugged.

"Can't help it," she said.

And then some weirdly poetic mood hit me, and as the next song began—Unchained Melody, if you're curious—I said something so cheesy I don't even want to repeat it.

"Do you not see," I quoted softly, after a few measures of music, "how necessary a world of pains and troubles is to school an intelligence and make it a soul?" Rosie looked at me for a long moment, one eyebrow raised.

"Who said that?" she demanded suspiciously.

"Keats, I think."

"Do you believe him? Honestly."

"Well—yes," I said slowly. "I mean, so what if the world doesn't care? I live in my own world, not the world's world. I'm not just automatically screwed."

"I guess I prefer unadulterated pessimism," she replied with a tiny smile. Then she gave a short, self-conscious laugh and added, "For a second there, when you did that quote, I thought you were trying to be romantic or something."

"Well, I was."

"Small-r-romantic, not big-R."

"Who, me?" I said dryly. "Romance isn't my strong suit, remember?"

"Did I say that?"

I nodded. "When I wanted to ask what's-her-name on a date—Lisa something. Lisa Wallis. And you let me practice on you first."

A smile flickered across her lips.

"That's right, I remember," she said. "You used dandelions for a bouquet."

"I thought they were pretty."

"They're weeds. That's not romantic."

"Well, one man's weed—"

"—is a weed is a weed is a weed."

"Ah, but they make a delicious salad."

Another tiny smile.

"Girls don't want a delicious salad, Peter."

"Good lord, that must be why I'm alone. To think, all that good lettuce wasted." She sighed heavily.

"Well, what *do* they want, then? The autographed works of Conrad? Unbreakable rice steamers?" I was really trying hard, but she just gave me that *look* that means HOPELESS. Another strange impulse hit me and I started to very obnoxiously whirl her around the dance floor, knowing it would make her crazy.

"Oh, Pete, stop it!" she said. "You're gonna knock someone over!"

"No I'm not."

"You are too."

"Am not."

"I'm telling you, somebody's going to break a hip and you'll have to pay for it."

"So be it." I was getting dizzy as dammit, and I even have very dependable inner ears, so Rosie must have been reeling too. I think the champagne had kicked in, because soon she clung to me, snickering in spite of herself.

"You bastard. Let go! I'll throw up."

"No way. Now that I've got you on your feet I'm keeping you there!" Relentlessly, I spun us faster, weaving my way through the relatives swaying cheek-to-cheek while the music began spiraling toward its end. You could have taken us for Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, except for Rosie's now-convulsive, almost unbalanced, laughter.

"You know what women want?" she said. "They want to dance even if they lie and say they don't. They want to fucking *dance!*" she cried again, holding onto me almost fiercely. Tears began to fall, as they always did when she laughed to the point of breathlessness or descended into despondency, sliding down the line of contact between our faces. Her laughter came in shuddering bursts like sobs—or maybe she sobbed as if laughing. We hit against a wall and leaned our shoulders against it for support, faces still pressed together while the room began to spin in our stead.

"We should have gone to the prom together," Rosie said suddenly between gasps. "We could have danced every song..." She trailed off, her fingernails digging into my shoulders. The song had ended, and I could feel the stares—not on the back of my neck, like you're supposed to, but in my chest, where something unpleasant seemed to ricochet from rib to rib. I kept my arms around Rosie, stroking her hair because I didn't

know what else to do, but she unstuck her damp cheek from mine and scrubbed the back of her hand across her eyes. "The goddamn high school prom," she muttered. "Hell, I'm going to be sick—"

She broke away and staggered across the dance floor, arms outstretched to aid her balance. I glanced around and found all the eyes suddenly pretending to look in other directions, which only made the feeling in my chest jump with even more awful vigor. The murmurs of those present brought back a sudden disjointed memory of being Second Nameless Puritan in the crowd scenes in *The Crucible*, muttering *watermelonwatermelon* over and over to create a realistic hum. For a second I was *in* high school again, not a dizzy idiot at a wedding but a clueless adolescent wondering what I'd done to make my prom date flee.

I found Rosie slumped on an upholstered bench some yards down the hall, sniffing.

Forever the idiot, all I could think to say as I sat down was "Hi."

She listlessly waved a silent "hi" of her own, not looking at me, and finally asked, "Do they all think I'm insane?"

"No," I said. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, staring at her fingernails.

"You don't feel sick?"

"No, it was the spinning. I'm all right."

"I was trying to cheer you up, believe it or not. I'm sorry. Talk about your pointy reckonings..."

"What do you mean?" She looked at me blankly.

"Oh, that was my favorite line of yours—"

"—from *The Crucible*," she finished, nodding as she remembered. "Let it go, Peter. This is life. It doesn't have to sound good or be *pithy*. Pith is irrelevant. Let there be no pith here."

"You're right," I said. "Sorry."

"I don't know why you've put up with me all these years. I'm so rotten. Why can't you be rotten too? Then I wouldn't have to feel so bad about it."

"But rotten's only fun if someone else has to put up with it."

She gave me a dark look.

"Sorry, sorry," I mumbled. "Pithy again..."

She flailed a hand irately, saying, "See what I'm talking about?! I give you a bossy stare and you say *sorry, sorry*. You *let* me be rotten! It's *you!*"

"It is not!" I said, indignant. "You were you before we even met."

"Well, then you certainly haven't helped straighten me out any, have you!"

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm not responsible for your personality flaws. And what are you talking about anyway? We argue all the time!"

"Not about *important* stuff."

"Oh, like pithiness?" I asked sarcastically.

"No, fool! Like *Bill*."

"Bill!" I yelled. "When I said something about Bill you about bit my head off!"

"Well, I didn't mean it! I was *that* close to—"

"To what? To being a rational person for once?"

"To admitting," she said slowly, between clenched teeth, "that you were right."

I stopped trying to come up with stinging retorts and just said, "Oh."

"Oh indeed."

"So what are you going to do?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe—well, like you said. Maybe give him back the damn diamond and stop all this moping around." I saw she had taken the ring off, and was turning it over in her palm, as if she hadn't really taken a good look at it before.

"Rosie," I said, watching her, "I was exaggerating. Please don't do anything you'll regret." But another little burst of adrenaline was shooting through my midsection—a slender hope, spinning out fine and soft as a spider's thread.

"Too late for that," she said.

"But don't you love him at all?" I wouldn't have asked if I thought she might say yes. I wouldn't have wanted to hear it.

She sighed. "I don't want my tombstone to say **COULD HAVE, BUT DIDN'T.**"

"It's not like you're eighty and diseased," I objected. "There's time yet. You shouldn't even be thinking about inscriptions. Or anything else if you don't feel like it yet."

"How did you do it?" she asked, suddenly looking me in the eye. "How did you get what you wanted without trying and I can't even claw my way through? What have you *got*?"

I could have said it, so easily. *I have you*. It wouldn't have answered her question but at least I would have said it. I thought. I swallowed. And I said,

"I don't know, Rosie."

She put the ring back on—but on the wrong hand, and nodded, as if in defeat.

"If you figure it out, tell me," she said quietly.

"I will," I said. "Are you ready to go back in?"

"No, let's just go, period. Drive me home and I'll heat us up some rice."

"Not scraped off the counter, I hope."

"Shut up and go get my purse," she said, smiling a little.

"Get your own purse, woman. I'm going to say goodbye to Bev." But we both knew I'd go get it anyway.

I slipped over to our table, where the unrelated persons sat drooling in various stages of catatonia, and picked up Rosie's small black bag. And a matchbook for a souvenir. And disentangled a flower from the half-destroyed centerpiece.

"Is she all right?" said a voice in my ear. I turned and found Bev peering over my shoulder with concern.

"Yes," I said. "Just a little worked up. You know."

Bev nodded.

"You're looking worn out yourself," she said. "Take her home, eat something, tuck her in bed. Tuck each other in."

I knew what she meant.

"It's not like that," I stammered. "We would never..." And I knew, sadly, that it

was true.

"Never's a long time," Bev said, patted me on the back, and moved off.

I looked at the flower I had pulled from the centerpiece—a lily of some sort, pale creamy white, beginning to wilt. One petal had caught a bead of candle wax.

"Might as well be a dandelion," I muttered. I tossed it back onto the tablecloth, turned and left.

Rosie was waiting for me in the hall with our coats.

"Bev says goodnight," I told her, handing over her purse.

"Goodnight, Bev," she murmured to the empty hallway.

I held her coat so she could put it on, and offered her my arm.

"I'll never get married," she said as we walked to the car. "I've decided."

"Never?"

"Well, at least not to Bill."

"I didn't like him anyway," I admitted.

"He didn't like you either." She laughed. "Silly man." I didn't know whether she meant me or him, and I didn't ask.

"So who *will* you marry?" —Did I say that? No, thank God—I only let it run through my head. That was a can of worms that didn't need opening.

"Whatcha thinking about?" Rosie asked. "Mr. Suddenly Quiet."

"Worms," I said.

She smiled.

"Like the day we met."

"Yeah," I said. "Here we are again."

—Rachel Bolton '99

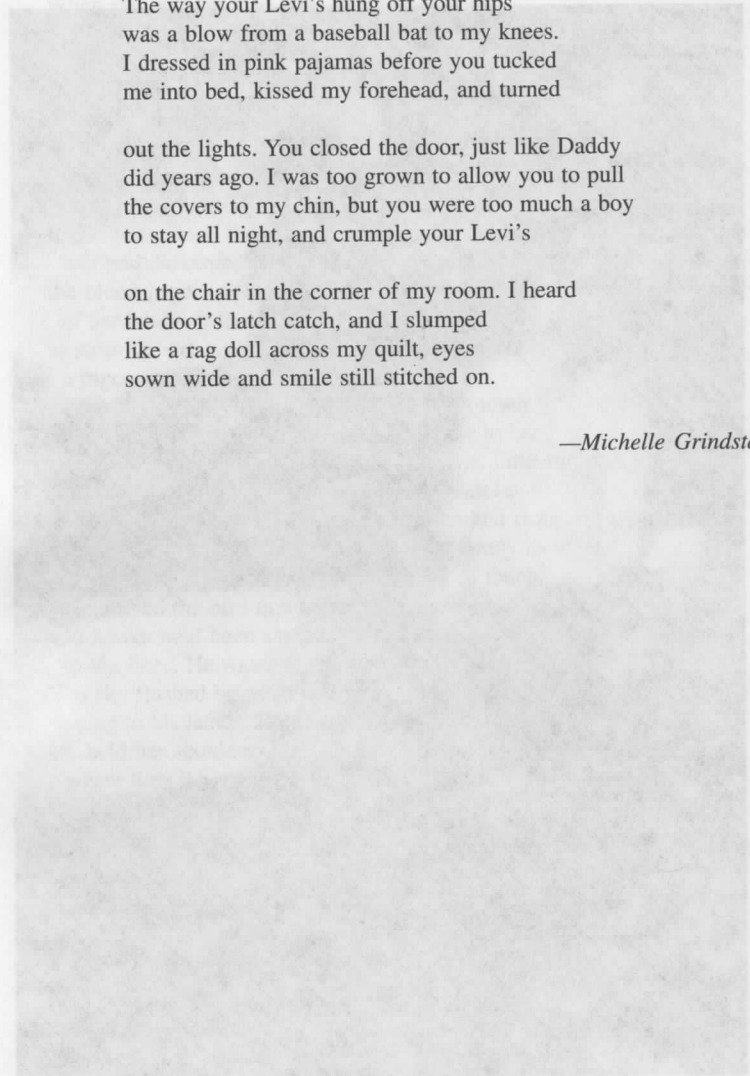
Bottom of the Ninth

The way your Levi's hung off your hips
was a blow from a baseball bat to my knees.
I dressed in pink pajamas before you tucked
me into bed, kissed my forehead, and turned

out the lights. You closed the door, just like Daddy
did years ago. I was too grown to allow you to pull
the covers to my chin, but you were too much a boy
to stay all night, and crumple your Levi's

on the chair in the corner of my room. I heard
the door's latch catch, and I slumped
like a rag doll across my quilt, eyes
sown wide and smile still stitched on.

—Michelle Grindstaff '02





"Still Light" by Angela Bliss '99

Stranger Fall Burning

When she brought it to him, wrapped in paper
 gray as skin and greased with rain,
 his finger lay heavy on the printed word. The news
 filled him with a kind of dread, the black of broken
 street lamps. The word he was following was *ash*,
 a story about a fire, perhaps, pollution, the river
 flooding beneath his feet. She stood
 on his carpet, weeping, every fold of her an ebb.
 It was because of the storm, her rain-webbed
 hair and darkening shoes, that first he missed
 the blood-jewels sating her step. Color ran through the ribs
 of her hands. It took the both of them
 to strip the wet layers and find its beating heart:
 a pigeon, pink-eyed, wild. Between two
 cars its wings had worked like a valve, its mouth,
 opened and closed, dumb. So making love to her
 that night, the attar of blood, rust-thick, was little surprise,
 a red line through her body, twisting as smoke
 between her legs. He touched her with marked flesh. He stood
 up from the bed and the evidence lay as heavy as scent,
 wax prints on the old quilt, a chronology of touch.
 He burned the bird in a barrel with the papers
 and leaves he'd been saving, slick flames beating close
 to the lines. He watched the red calm to black.
 The sky flushed between two trees, and still, the musk of smoke
 clung to his hands. He buried his breath in her hair.
 He held her shoulders, and his fingers made florid marks
 where they lay, and her bones were as small and sharp as wings.

—Alison Stine '00



"Hiding Nature" by Amy Deaner '99

Stop at the Soldier

Once she started the day, she could not stop smiling. This was one of the stipulations for Elementary School Tour-Guides, and Ellen went through the day at the art museum with her smile-muscles clenched, her eyes soft and friendly and forgiving. She was allowed to be stern only when the works were threatened—when a sticky hand reached for something it shouldn't—and this always happened at least once a tour. But even when stern, the smile must remain.

Ellen relished the days in between her work at the museum. She looked forward to class when she could sit, mute, carved in stone and taking in words instead of expelling them. Her cinema professor was one of those who had forgotten what it was like to be a student, and therefore talked without end. But Ellen was thankful for this. It gave her a chance to relax.

Today, however, was not one of those days. The hub of a gaggle of fourth-graders, she moved with the expert motion of a person whose every sense is intent on keeping fingers away from canvases, hands away from mobiles, arms away from sculptures.

"Now in this room do you see the paintings with lots of colors, lots of blotches? They're like fingerpaintings, aren't they, and don't add your fingers to them, dear. Remember, keep your hands to yourself and stay with me over here, alright? Pretty soon we'll get to the statues, and those are really delicate so you've gotta be really good in there and not touch *anything*, OK?"

Through the portrait hall, mention the eyes. "They watch you, isn't that cool?" Pass quickly into the pottery, and out—never keeps their interest for long.

"Now we're gonna go over to this room—watch the carpet here, don't trip on it—where all the jewels are. And they're all real, all old. Kings and queens wore some of them. This one's—oh, be careful over there. Remember, stay by me. Be my shadow..."

Boredom starts to set in—sum up the still-lives, the watercolors. Point and gesture, be enthusiastic.

"And this is my favorite room. These sculptures are marble—can you believe someone carved them? Have any of you ever tried to carve something? Your pumpkins—yes. I love Halloween." *Wave them away, smile hard, keep them back. They glance quickly before they duck under the ropes. Stern, but smile. Handle gently. Sweep the arms, talk cheerfully, stop at the soldier. Talk of things about him they don't listen to. Breath sigh of relief. Point at doorway. Teacher is waiting.*

In class before excusing them, Ellen's cinema professor gave them their final exam assignment. "Film something." They had a little over two months. Ellen wrote the due-date in her planner, chewed on the cherry-flavored antacid, and waited for her stomach to quiet before she got up. Walking home, another pang hit her and she stopped, put a carefully-clenched hand to her stomach and tried to look like she was window-shopping. At home she climbed the stairs gingerly, put her key in the lock and dropped her bag

on the floor. She fell to the couch and heard footsteps.

"Hurting you again?"

Ellen nodded. Her roommate made a face. "You had coffee this morning, didn't you?"

Ellen nodded again and grimaced. Melissa opened the curtains, shaking her head. She had graduated the year before, and was a social-worker by day, coffee-shop waitress by night. Melissa smiled all the time, and because she wanted to.

After Melissa left, Ellen remained on the couch, careful not to move, careful to ride through each pain breathing, focusing her eyes out over the world, at the apartment building across from hers. The windows were large in her apartment—floor to ceiling—and she loved having the curtains open. It was late afternoon when she returned from either the museum or school, and by then the sun was low, no longer a piercing spotlight for their living room. Melissa opened the curtains before she left for work just as Ellen came home. It was a routine.

A trip to the bathroom convinced Ellen she would never eat again and subject her intestines to such raw, twisting fire. But a half hour's peace and quiet soon brought hunger pangs and she made soup, hot tea. Again, it was a routine.

She ate standing up, at the window, looking out and watching the woman in her bed. She was very old, very small, starved body poking up through light blue quilt, dry rag of stiff white bristles for hair. The old woman's apartment was directly across from Ellen's, but slightly down a floor. Far away, and yet just barely close enough for Ellen to see her unbrushed hair, her legs like broomsticks underneath the bedding, the wheelchair at her feet, the framed photo on the left side of the bed next to the gray telephone, and the small rounded chair in the corner—its back to the window. It was like a hospital room, but there must have been more to it, farther back, a kitchen, sitting room, bathroom maybe. Ellen couldn't see back that far.

Today was the same. The woman lay, still, on her back, right hand holding a Kleenex, her head propped slightly up, sterile light coming from some source in the room Ellen could never see. Far below, traffic beeped pathetically; the stone of the building grew grayer with the setting sun. Ellen finished her soup and went to get her books. She sat on the couch and lay her hand on her stomach. She read.

This little boy had a stubborn cowlick and a right shoe that never stayed on. He liked to lose his shoe and then stay behind with it. Ellen kept her smile and made it extra-big for him. She tried to become his favorite human, but something insincere leaked through. To make things worse, her stomach chose to hurt at the same time.

"They're like fingerpaintings, aren't they?" She watched her words float through the air, enter his head, register, and then catapult his entire body in a one-shoed frenzy towards the nearest painting. She caught him just in time. "Don't add your fingers to them, dear. Remember, keep your hands to yourself and stay with me over here, alright?"

Don't forget about the rest of them, swing around the drinking fountain, raise eyebrows emphatically. "And thiiiis is the portrait hall!"

Tell them to watch the eyes follow. Walk backwards. Don't bump.

Portrait room, move quick. Jewel room.

"Kings and queens wore some of these. Wouldn't you like to wear a diamond like that? Watch the case, be careful! Walk around here—why doesn't everyone pretend you're my shadow? This is the still-life room. Lotsa fruit, huh?"

She felt the rumble of pain familiarly distant in her body, felt it creep deliberately closer, felt it tie her stomach muscles into slow perfect knots. If she could just get through this tour, she could sit down for a while. Skip lunch. Just sit. It would go away by the end of the day.

Watercolors. Take his hand, lead him to the sculptures. Watch the rest of them—they're OK. Hold him still. Smile down. Stop at the soldier. "He's the oldest. Do you think you could carve him out of marble? Yes, like a pumpkin. I love Halloween."

The old woman was getting fed. Ellen sat on the couch and watched the nurse spoon-feed her, bite by bite, chew by chew. The nurse was the only company the old woman ever got—three times a day to be fed, countless other times to be checked on, to change the bed, to sit her in the wheelchair, to help her into another long, beautiful white nightgown. She never wore anything else, just this same nightgown, or two of the same, to switch-off between.

It was very early morning, before the sun was up, and Melissa was in the bathroom. Ellen waited her turn, eyes wrinkled with sleep, feet cold and resting off the couch on the linoleum. She sat with her hands in her lap, back straight, trying to stretch the tired out of her muscles. She thought of her cinema final and pushed it again to the back of her brain.

The bathroom door creaked open and Melissa emerged, rounding the corner and disappearing into her room. She yelled out to Ellen in a voice always too chipper for before dawn.

"I dreamt there was jelly in Joe's hair last night!"

Ellen went into the bathroom. Squeezed a long line of turquoise gel on her toothbrush and stuck it in her mouth. She made a noise to let Melissa know she'd heard her.

"So I looked it up in my dream dictionary and do you know what it means?"

Ellen spit. She stuck her head out of the bathroom and raised her eyebrows in Melissa's direction.

"A dream featuring jelly, Jell-O, or gelatin signifies a period of gloom (or depression) due either to loss of a friend or to the exposition of something you'd have preferred stayed hidden—unless you ate it, in which case the augury is reversed," she read. "What's an augury? Can you believe it? They have *jelly* in here!"

Melissa's boyfriend Joe was her fourth love. He foresaw marriage, she did not. Ellen again pointed this out to her and joked that jelly actually sounded good right now. Strawberry. On a bagel.

"But if you eat it, you'll hurt," Melissa said. "I think you have an ulcer. I don't care what your doctor says."

Ellen only shook her head and went into her room. Some people just had sensi-

tive stomachs—hers had always, always hurt. There was nothing she could do. She always joked that least she was building a high pain-threshold—childbirth would be easy, a piece of cake. Childbirth would be nothing.

The sculpture room underwent a cleaning one week—something that did not at all go well with the sudden great influx of kindergarten classes into the art museum the same week. Without being able to go through the sculpture room and complete the circle, Ellen had to lead them all the way back through every room to get to the lobby. By the end of the week, she and the other Elementary guide held their breath that the cleaning would indeed be done on time. It was.

On Monday morning Ellen walked through the room on her own, without a flock, gazing smile-less at the way the marble shone, the bronze gleamed. The soldier's eyes were still darker than the rest of his body, but a little of the age had been somewhat erased, a little of the filth somewhat removed. She lingered on him for a while, her hands on the velvet-red ropes. Even as children's high-pitched voices entered the building, his expression did not change.

Time was running close to the edge. The empty page of notebook-white blinked at her like a stop-light, held her tight like a hand to her wrist. In less than a month she had to "film something" worthy of a final, worthy of a grade good enough to convince herself and everyone else that she could quit the museum and find a job that made her *move*, made her eyes dance wild, made her love the life she'd sensed and hunted and captured.

But the ideas did not come. Ellen's eyes danced wild, but with worry, not excitement. Worry that she had yet to think of something, worry that her current stomach hunger would only lead her to pain, worry that the old woman across the street had no visitors, no TV, no strength even to lift her own spoon.

In the bed, the woman lay with her arms crossed, still clutching the Kleenex, still propped on a pillow. Ellen looked down at her pen and put its point on the page, tried to find an idea, looked up out the window at the old woman's misshapen hair and blue blanket. She squinted hard trying to discern something in the photo beside the bed, but of course couldn't make it out. Film, film, film.

Melissa came home. Ellen looked at her, half-surprised. It must be late. She should just forget it all and go to sleep.

Grabbing a box of Crunch 'n Munch off the shelf in the kitchen, she paced the floor. The old woman's window moved back and forth, always moving, never changing. Ellen gritted her teeth and growled loud enough for Melissa to hear.

"You should come to the coffee shop for ideas. Or even walk around with me at the Center tomorrow. Talk to some people. They'll give you ideas."

Out the window, the old woman uncrossed her arms and turned her face from the night. She was awake, too.

Swirl around the room, point and look back to check for scatterers. "See the paintings with lots of colors, lots of blotches?"

"That's Modernism!" Rarely did a kid know what she was talking about.

"You're right! Where did you learn that?" *Too late. Attention gone. Arms reaching, fingers clawing. Portraits—eyes. Pottery—next...*

"Now we're gonna go over to this room—watch the carpet here, don't trip on it—where all the jewels are."

The cowlick-shoe-gone boy had today taken the form of a girl in overalls. Her friend Goldilocks seemed to share the same zest for life. *Pain in the stomach, pain in the stomach. Smile, don't show.*

It took everything Ellen had to pull her arms from her stomach and sweep them up and around her, imaginary octopus tentacles pulling third-graders to her center. Her elastic waist-band was confining, her high-heels like stilts. Only two more rooms, and then rest for her—antacid. She had to fight this, breath out, wait as the wave passed, and then walk...

"When I was little I loved to paint with watercolors. Do you guys like these?" *Sculpture room, wind around the ropes. Restlessness eats away—look at the soldier but no don't touch! What was the rule? Come back under the rope—come back under the rope, dear. Dear. Smile. Teacher. Escape.*

After class, Ellen took the long way home, walking slowly, lazily, searching the crowd for genius. It was ridiculous. Last semester she'd filmed her toy-inflatable green alien walking down the street, picking up a \$20 bill, and putting it down for a shiny penny. Certainly nothing could be any worse than that.

She took the stairs two-by-two, her hands clutching the straps of her back-pack, her eyes cast down at the ground. In the apartment, Melissa was putting her coat on over her waitress uniform. Ellen sat on the couch and opened her bag, producing her notebook and pen. Again. Melissa pulled the curtain back and said goodbye. Ellen lay back and began to write, lazily glancing up and out the window. The old woman's bed was empty. The strange thing about this, she immediately realized, was that the bed was naked, empty of sheets. The even stranger thing was the wheelchair. It stood right there by the bed, as usual...but no old woman sat in it.

Without knowing or caring, Ellen opened her hands and dropped everything to the floor. She found herself with glass pressed cold against her palms, glass standing centimeters from her nose. Looking past the faint line of her own reflection, she searched the room. The bed was indeed stripped of absolutely everything, light was still pouring cold from somewhere further back in the apartment, the telephone was still sitting by the bed, and the photo was still there but had been knocked forward on its face. Ellen heard the traffic below her, and was uncomfortably confused because everything seemed as it had been before. Yet wrong...

The phone rang behind her and she turned her head absentmindedly toward it, but sudden motion in the old woman's room caught her eye. A figure in a black dress-suit

walked very slowly to the photo, picked it up and moved past the foot of the bed. The figure turned and sat in the rounded chair in the corner, her back to Ellen. She bowed her head. Ellen had never seen her before.

She let the phone ring, let the machine pick it up, let herself stand and so quietly take in what was happening. And yet even with the mystery of this seated-person's identity looming in her mind, Ellen's eyes kept going back to the bed, back to the chalky white square of the mattress. Her fingers squeaked loudly against the glass. Strangely, she could not tell if her stomach hurt.

Modern painters. Fingerprintings. Hold hands back.

Through portrait hall, remember the eyes.

Skip pottery. Say nothing. Swim through.

Jewelry. And they're all real, all old.

Point and gesture, be enthusiastic. Tell them the still-lives are watercolors, the watercolors are still-lives.

And this is my favorite room. I love Halloween.

In front of the soldier, she rattled off the information. She smiled and watched the kids hit the ropes, swing them back and forth. One of the boys tried to dart under but she was too quick for him. She pulled him back, sent him off with the others. "Bye, dear."

At the end of the day, Ellen helped usher people out of the rooms to the exit, her hands clasped in front of her stomach, her step slow and measured. She watched the last man leave the sculpture room, his hand on his wife's lower back, guiding her in front of him. Her stomach burned. She closed her eyes.

When she opened them, she was standing still, in front of the soldier, her legs pressing against the rope. The warmth of her hands on her stomach made her shiver for a moment; she was cold everywhere else. She thought of her film class, her deadlines, her paycheck, her window. She thought of the old woman and her nightgown—she thought of the room empty, the bed cold. And she thought of how the room seemed just as dead before as after.

Lifting up the rope, Ellen glanced quickly before she ducked. Holding out her hands, she wrapped her arms around his body, pulled herself close, anchored herself to him. Her fingers traced his arms, up the back of his uniform, pressed hard into his neck, felt the stone. Felt the unforgiving rock she clung to. Held them together, there, granite. And slowly leaning closer to his dark eyes, she pressed her lips very hard against his, and kissed.

—Hillary Campbell '00

rocking

As I held that child, hit on each side with
cries and hands raised, my arms knew how to calm;
my hips knew how to sway. I could not take
the brown fingers from her mouth; I did not

try to free her. Her left fist contracted,
anemone drawing me back to her.
My hips moved while she rested her tired head
lightly on the knowledge that I was there,

now lifting her chin to show me that I
was not sure how long. I asked only what
I could; her wet hand opened and it held
only silence; she was five years silent.

—Bekah Taylor '00

The Armor of the Beach

the sand here is not salty like the sea
but with a ferric brine so rust-red and true
ringing slip-sandy cliffs and rip-tide walls

the sand here is not the soft coral of Bermuda
nor the man-face dust of the moon, but glass
grains hot and piercing, teaching you to run

this bitter outpost, so discreetly fragile
and needy deters not the howls
of hurricane spray and dissolving water

deters not the desperate cries of plovers
and fish-hooked seagulls nor the low-tide
wind of mussels and periwinkles too slow

and too frail in their armor to flee the air—
only the soft feet of children curious to see
the ephemeral nautilus and sidewalking crab

—Georgia Riepe '02



“Self-Portrait A” by Sarah Leyrer '01

Contributors Notes

Angela Bliss is a senior English (writing) major from Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania, and has a fascination with photography and poetry. She'd like to send special shouts out to her photography partners in crime: her Jehova's brother from the village, Chef Jef Bliss and Denison senior, Sarah "Turtle" Neal. Angie's favorite book is *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein, and she is currently working on a manuscript of the poetry and photography of the working class, tentatively entitled: "What I Did For a Living."

Rachel Bolton, a senior Creative Writing major, was seen dancing a merry jig upon learning she would be published in *Exile*. Apart from writing, she enjoys complaining about the new tropical frogs in *Froot Loops*, and sneaking around campus in silent shoes. Rachel hopes to be the world's first itinerant dessert chef to reach Enlightenment.

Hillary Campbell, a junior English (writing) major, art history minor, and Co-Editor-in-Chief of *Exile*, loves her pillow, doesn't believe in germs, and covets anything liquid in language. Her hair smells like *Stauf's*.

Rachel Colina is a freshman double math and art minor with an emphasis on history and writing. She realizes that some day she'll have to choose a major but hopes that day is a long time from now. She is from Cincinnati, Ohio. She made it to the finals of the college bowl tournament (go Trivial Cahoots!)...and that's about all she's done at Denison so far, though she signed up for numerous things at the DCA Activities Fair.

Amy Deaner is a senior English (literature) major, and studio art minor. She says, "For in the end, we will conserve only what we love, love only what we understand, and understand only what we are taught; teach with imagination and creativity."

Maeghan Demmons has lived in North Haven, Maine, since she was born. It's an island and primarily a lobster-fishing community. Living there has influenced her interests in the ocean and the way people live in relation to their environment. Maeghan is also interested in studio art, printmaking in particular, at Denison. She is a sophomore majoring in sociology/anthropology, and trying to write poems occasionally.

Paul Durica is a junior English/cinema major from Cleveland, Ohio. His story "Dancing" is forthcoming in *Higher Education: A Reader for College Lives*. He is the current editor-in-chief of *MoYo* magazine. Like all of his stories, this one is for his VP.

Tom Dussel is a sophomore English (literature) major and Spanish minor from Toledo, Ohio. He likes playing tennis and watching television.

Michelle Grindstaff is surprised that she finally emptied her coat pocket of the poems she scribbled on napkins while drinking coffee in a *Frisch's Big Boy* in Toledo, Ohio. She is the product of a Catholic all-girls high school, Notre Dame Academy, and a current freshman English and Psychology major. When she is not busy procrastinating, Michelle sometimes studies Chinese and often drives her car too fast while singing to Bob Dylan or Bruce Springsteen. She makes no apologies for her hideous singing voice or the terrible

service she provides as a waitress at *Victoria's* in Granville. After all, she's a writer and not a waitress, or so she hopes.

Todd Gys is a senior studio art/environmental studies double major with concentrations in printmaking and planning/design, respectively.

Tom Hankinson is a freshman English (writing) major with a penchant for hilarious, high-paced capers. His passionate quest for Ultimate Toast leads him and the gang into some pretty slippery situations, but they're always ready for trouble in their snazzy ride, the Tape-mobile. You're sure to love the hysterical hi-jinks Tom and his "crazy compadres" run into in this high-energy romp through a twisted liberal arts education.

Katie Kroner is a sophomore English (writing) and communications double major from Cincinnati, Ohio. She is a member of Denison's percussion ensemble and can, on warm days, frequently be found on "The Wall" with a drum in her lap.

Sarah Leyrer is a sophomore Spanish major and she likes to fly.

Kris Lewis is from Olmsted Falls, Ohio. She is a senior art history major, and minors in studio art. She is obsessed with photography, mashed potatoes, and brushing her teeth. Also, Kris takes great pleasure in teasing "Little Boy" Gammon-Hittelman.

K. Moore of Leesburg, Virginia, a Physics and Classical Civilizations major of the Class of 2001, is currently looking for a 6'3" male with Ph.D. and glasses, preferably blue, amphibian, and with enchanted ancestry.

Georgia Riepe is a freshman from Sudbury, Massachusetts.

Alison Stine is a junior English (writing) major. Last semester she spent making a friend of the western sky in Bath, England. She bakes cookies without recipes, dyes her hair when stressed, and has been known to blow bubbles at strangers. She can often be seen happily chauffeuring Mr. Benchley in her little red car en route to adventure. And yes, she prefers to be the driver. "Fall Burning" is for North Parade Flat 3.

Bekah Taylor is a junior from Hinsdale, Illinois, majoring in English (writing) and some other stuff.

Frazier Taylor is a freshman biochemistry major and studio art minor from Louisville, Kentucky. He likes volleyball, swimming, soccer and frisbee, and he loves the guitar.

David Tulkin, born and raised in the San Francisco area, is a sophomore philosophy major. He enjoys traveling, and has been to places such as Israel and Egypt, and has even lived in Thailand. In his free time he enjoys chilling and playing Ultimate Frisbee for Denison's team DFUC. After graduation he hopes to either pursue a PhD in philosophy or open his own pet store.

Justin Walker is a senior English (writing) major from Duxbury, Massachusetts.

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